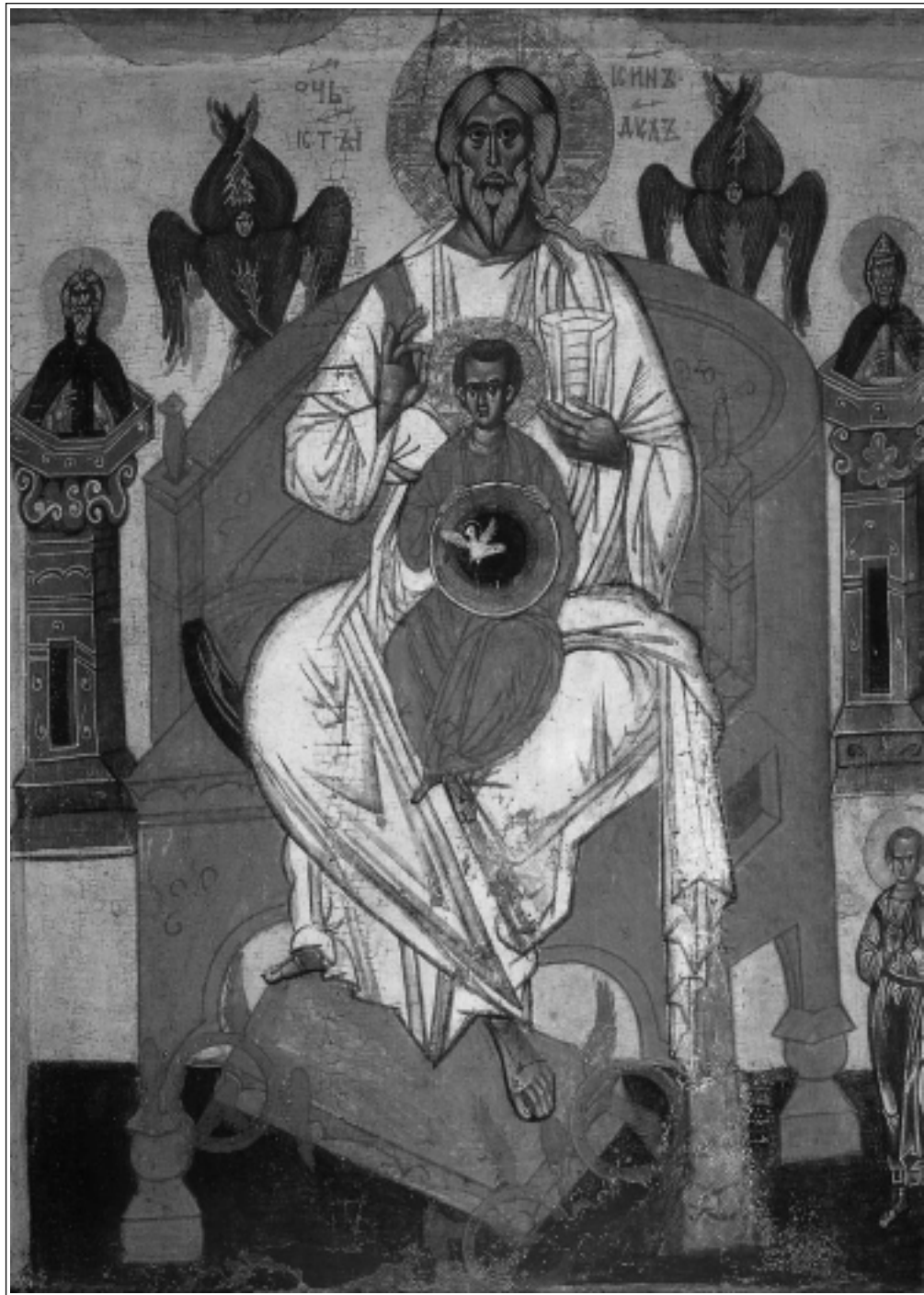


Reflecting the Merciful Face of the Father

*The Consecrated Life in
View of the Celebration
of the Jubilee Year 2000*

by Camilo Maccise, OCD

**translated from the Spanish
by Philip Gage, SM**



"Paternity" Tret' Jakov Gallery, Moscow; courtesy Religious Education Resources (www.silk.net).

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Preface

With this issue of the *CMSM Forum*, the Conference of Major Superiors of Men completes publication of the three Latin American bishops' reflections on the Jubilee Year.

Two years ago, we began contemplation of the consecrated life in light of the jubilee year by offering the only English translation of the first document. The second, *Religious as a Sign of Sisterhood-Brotherhood*, was published last summer.

Released in Spanish by CELAM (the Episcopal Conferences of Latin America), the Latin American bishops published this triad to help integrate the message of *Tertio Millennio Adveniente* into the celebration of the Church of Latin America. The pamphlet was written by Camilo Maccise, OCD, Superior General of the Discalced Carmelites and president of the

Union of Superiors General in Rome.

The purpose of the document is to make available to religious for reflection and discussion an integration of key themes of *Vita Consecrata* with themes of *Tertio Millennio Adveniente* as the millennium proceeds.

For CMSM, making this document available in English is one way that the Conference can help facilitate that process for U.S. religious and offer further reflections on the teaching of *Vita Consecrata* itself.

In Latin America, the documents were published in succeeding years, 1997-99. You will note in the Introduction that this third document was published in 1999; we have not changed these references.

We have also not attempted to change the language of the document from its appeal to Latin American religious. There



Yahweh, Virtual Church Gallery of Art.

is hardly a point made in the document that is not equally applicable in this country.

The Conference hopes that this resource will help local communities, regional communities, and institutes engage in serious and timely reflection on *Vita Consecrata* and the implication of *Tertio Millennio Adveniente* for religious life and its continuing renewal as it encounters the culture of a new millennium.

We hope your experience with

this last document is as positive and thoughtful as the first, *Witnesses of Christ in the World* and the second, *Religious as a Sign of Sisterhood Brotherhood*.

We are grateful to Philip Gage, SM, for his translation of these documents.

*Stephen Glodek, SM
President
Conference of Major
Superiors of Men*

Reflecting the Merciful Face of the Father

Camilo Maccise, OCD

Introduction

Saint Paul begins his second letter to the Corinthians with a greeting to his readers and an expression of thanksgiving to God: “Blessed be the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ, the Father of mercies and the God of all consolation.” (2 Cor 1:3)

This Pauline text clearly and transparently shows us the face of the God of our Lord Jesus Christ, and therefore it could serve as an entry point to the third and last year of the preparation phase of the Jubilee Year 2000. That year was dedicated to

broadening the horizons of believers so that they will see things in the perspective of Christ: in the perspective of the “Father who is in heaven,” (cf. Mt 5:45) from whom the Lord was sent and to whom he has returned. (cf. Jn 16:28)¹

In the third year of preparation for the Jubilee, the Pope invited us to deepen our Christian life as a great pilgrimage toward the

Father’s house. This requires of us continual conversion as liberation from sin and choosing good. The Sacrament of Penance should be rediscovered in this context, and the virtue of charity should stand out since “God is love.” (1 Jn 4:8, 16) We have to become the voice of all the poor of the world

proposing the jubilee as an appropriate time to give thought, among other things, to reducing substantially, if not canceling outright, the international debt which seriously threatens the future of many nations.²

Two commitments will characterize the third year of preparation: “meeting the challenge of secularism and dialogue with the great religions.”³ Finally Pope John Paul tells us that

in this broad perspective of commitments, Mary most holy, the highly favored daughter of the Father, will appear before the eyes of believers as the perfect

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model of love toward both God and neighbor. As she herself says in the canticle of the “Magnificat,” great things were done for her by the Almighty.... Her motherhood, which began in Nazareth and was lived most intensely in Jerusalem at the foot of the cross, will be felt during this year as a loving and urgent invitation addressed to all the children of God so that they will return to the house of the Father when they hear her maternal voice: “Do whatever Christ tells you.” (Jn 2:5)⁴

The postsynodal Apostolic Exhortation *Vita Consecrata*, for its part, presents consecrated life as the result of an initiative coming wholly from the Father “who asks those whom he has chosen to respond with complete and exclusive devotion.”⁵ In the same document, consecrated individuals are invited to commit themselves to work for justice and peace as an expression of the Church’s preferential option for the poor and those on the margin of society,⁶ and they are also invited to revalidate the sacrament of Reconciliation as a frequent encounter with God’s mercy,⁷ and to open themselves to “interreligious dialogue.”⁸

In this present booklet we would like to help consecrated individuals to enter into the preparatory dynamic for the Jubilee Year 2000. We have already considered the Christological perspective of the religious call and mission,⁹ and

we attempted to deepen the pneumatological dimension of the consecrated life.¹⁰ We can now “close the circle” of our reflections on renewal, still in the light of Tertio Millennio Adveniente and *Vita Consecrata*, focusing this time on the Father of Mercies, the source and the goal of everything, who calls religious to be signs and instruments of his goodness and faithfulness beginning with the profound experience of his paternal/maternal face that invites us to conversion to love God and neighbor.

In our journey of preparation for the Jubilee in this last year preceding its celebration, we will take time (1) to consider in the first place the revelation of the motherly/fatherly face of the God of our Lord Jesus Christ. Then, (2) we will speak of the experience of that God and the conditions required for the authenticity of such experience. (3) The personal commitment for human values and social change as the expression of our conversion to brotherhood/sisterhood will appear as one of the consequences of the experience of God, together with interreligious dialogue. Finally, (4) the Blessed Virgin of the Magnificat, beloved daughter of the Father, will be considered as “the perfect model of love toward both God and neighbor”¹¹ as well as the one who accompanies us on our return home to the Father.

Chapter One

Rediscovering the Face of God as Mother/Father

Tertio Millennio Adveniente presents Christian life as *a great pilgrimage to the house of the Father, whose unconditional love for every human creature, and in particular for the “prodigal son” (cf. Lk 15:11-32), we discover anew each day. This pilgrimage takes place in the heart of each person, extends to the believing community and then reaches to the whole of humanity.*¹²

... when the Old Testament calls God “father” it does not mean a progenitor, an ancestor, in the same sense as contemporary mythologies. It signifies, rather, God as the creator.

1. A Gradual Revelation

The revelation of God as our Father took shape gradually until it shone forth clearly in Jesus Christ. Already in antiquity the notion of divine fatherhood was widespread in the Near East. There are tribes, clans and families that mention a divine ancestor in their origins. The king especially, as the people’s representative, shares in a privileged way in

the divine Father’s power. In some way family bonds existing between human beings and God by means of the word “father” have the sense of an absolute and untouchable authority.

Along with this idea that emphasizes God’s authority, to apply the name “father” to the deity brings out the concept of mercy and goodness. Thus a Sumerian-Babylonian hymn invokes the moon god in these words: “benevolent father who has taken in hand the life of our

whole country.” And Mardok is described in this fashion: “his wrath is a stormy flood; when he is appeased, a merciful father.” These concepts also appear in biblical texts where Yahweh’s absolute authority is mentioned simultaneously with the divine mercy.

Looking in the Old Testament

In the Old Testament the word “father” appears only a few times with reference to God, fifteen to be exact. On occasion it indicates God as creator. (Dt 32:6, Mal 2:10) At other times it highlights Yahweh’s mercy. (Ps 103:13-14) It is important to note here that when the Old Testament calls God “Father” it does not mean a progenitor, an ancestor,

in the same sense as contemporary mythologies. It signifies, rather, God as the creator. (Dt 14:1-2, Ex 4:22, Jer 31:9) God chose Israel as “my son” through an histori-

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cal event: the exodus. From this arose the concept "filiation by choice." (Cf. Rom 9:4) The prophets took this as their basis for reproaching the people's ingratitude toward Yahweh, the Father of the People. (Jer 3:4-5, 19-20; Is 1:2-3, 64:7-8; Hos 11:3,8; Mal 1:6)

The principal steps in the unfolding of the revelation of God as Father in the Old Testament lead from a collective fatherhood to a paternity related to the just. Thus it begins with the idea of God's collective fatherhood. God loves Israel, and the divine fatherhood shows forth in the exodus. (Ex 4:22-23) In Deuteronomy, written after the return from Exile (sixth century B.C.), we find a perfect example of this collective fatherhood in the Cantic of Moses. (Dt 32:4-6) The prophets emphasize that a special and gratuitous love lies at the basis of God's fatherhood of Israel. (Hos 11:1-8) Another step is the consideration of God's paternity related specially to the king who governs in God's name. (Ps 2:7, 2 Sm 7:14) Already much closer to the New Testament, a more personal filiation appears in the books of Sirach and Wisdom, where God is not only father of the people but also father of the just one. (Sir 23:1,4; 51:10; Wis 2:16-19)

We could draw the conclusion that in the Old Testament God is not Father because he generates in some physical way, but because he has called the children of Israel to be a people of free men and women. He is Father because he loves and because

he chooses from out of the land a people whose way on earth he guides by means of the law and whom he leads to a future of truth and freedom. In this way, almost without even using the word "father," Israel has begun to bring about what we could call the great revolution of the father symbol.¹³

The Newness of Jesus' Revelation

In the New Testament, the Gospels put the word "father" on the lips of Jesus 170 times when he refers to God, thus indicating that this was the way Jesus addressed God. To give the statistics, we find Jesus using "father" four times in Mark, 42 in Matthew, 15 in Luke, and 109 times in John. In the context of prayer, it is once in Mark, five times in Matthew, six in Luke, and nine in John.

Christ brings us the fullness of revelation God is his Father (Mt 7:21) and also our father. (Mt 5:45) Jesus is the beloved son, and when calling God his father he uses a term that marks the whole particular relationship of filial confidence of the Only Begotten of God. It is the Aramaic word "Abba," which is the diminutive of "father," that is, Papa

or Daddy. Addressing God in this way Christ has introduced something absolutely new. He speaks to God as a little child speaks to his or her father, with the same simplicity, the same intimacy and the same trusting abandon. With the word "Abba," Jesus shows the very essence of his relation with God. Not only is there total confidence, but

the word also expresses the free submission of an adult son toward the father he loves, along with the security Christ experiences from having received from the Father full knowledge of God. For a Jew, it was totally improper, and thus unacceptable, to address God using such a familiar term. (Mk 14:36)

Jesus taught the disciples to address God in this way of his (Lk 11:2, Mt 6:7-14), and he thus authorized them to take the name “Abba” from his own lips. In this way, Jesus associated them with his relationship to God.

To make this a reality, Christ sent the Spirit who, by making us children of God in truth, enables us to call God “Abba.” (Gal 4:4-6, Rom 8:14-17)

2. Our Life as Children of God: :Life “in Christ and in the Spirit”

If we can call God “Father” and pray with joyful hope, it is because we have received the Holy Spirit. Our Christian life is, above all, a life “in the Spirit” as Paul says. For John and Paul the presence of God in a person, through Christ, in the Spirit, constitutes the essence of the message of salvation. Paul identifies “being in the Spirit” with “being in Christ.” (Rom 8:9) We receive the Spirit through Christ. All the effects of our Christian life come from the presence of Christ and the Spirit. (Cf. Rom 8:1-4, 1 Cor 1:30)

To understand completely what “life in Christ and in the Spirit” means, we need to

analyze the fundamental teachings of Scripture on this point.

In the Old Testament, God’s presence with the People characterizes the Covenant. (Ex 25:8, Num 35:34) This Covenant of God with his People brings with it the gift of the Law, which meant everything for the Jewish People. (Cf. Sir 24:3-5, 8-32) The Law did not represent some kind of burden more or less oppressive, but rather a privilege for them. (Sir 24:21)

And as the People experienced their faults and failures in observing the Covenant and the Law, this gave rise to the desire for both a new covenant to which the People would remain faithful and for a new law which would give the inner strength to act according to its demands.

The prophets announce a new covenant and a new law “at the end of time.” Above all, Jeremiah (31:31-34) speaks of a new covenant and a law written in the heart. Explaining the Jeremiah text, Ezekiel (36:25-27) states that this law is the Spirit who will transform all humanity. The effects of this new law and new spirit are the possibility of loving and serving God and sharing in God’s life. (Cf. Jer 31:31-34; Ez 36:27, 37:1-10, 47:1-12)

In the New Testament, the Gospel according to John alludes to this new covenant and new law. (Jn 1:17) Christ baptizes in the Spirit. (Jn 1:29-33) “No one can enter the kingdom of God without being born of water and Spirit.” (Jn 3:5) At the moment of his death, Jesus “handed over the Spirit.” (Jn 19:30)

Paul also speaks of this in

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several of his letters. (Cf. 1 Thes 4:8-9, Gal 4:6-7) He writes especially about life in the Spirit in chapter 8 of the Letter to the Romans.

In chapter 7 he speaks of life under the Law. Then, in contrast to that, he devotes chapter 8 to life under the Spirit. We could summarize the main points of the chapter as follows:

- For those who are united to Christ Jesus, the spirit of life takes the place of "flesh." (vv. 1-13)
- Those in whom the Spirit lives are children of God, and therefore heirs. (vv. 14-30)
- The source of this new life is the love of God in Christ (vv. 31-37)
- This presence of Christ and the Spirit is active, and it directs the Christian's moral conduct and requires constant docility to God. (Rom 8:4, Gal 5:17-24) The Spirit leads the Christian to true freedom, understood as the movement away from slavery to service of God. To be free means to act not because of some external law but rather out of love. The Spirit imparts to us the power to accomplish God's will not as someone else's will but as our own.¹⁴

3. God, our Father, in our Human Reality

Because of our human experience, two problems arise when we speak of and want to convey the concept of God as Father. First of all, there is the objection that comes from the crisis of meaning related to fatherhood and how to understand what fatherhood means. Secondly, there is the question of theologi-

cal legitimacy when we use feminine references to God.

The first difficulty arises from the meaninglessness of our human life, both in a personal and a collective sense. Many people let themselves be overcome with a certain fatalism in the face of what appears to be the triumph of evil throughout history. Yet no matter how much evidence there may be to prove that evil has conquered, nevertheless a mature

faith, that is, one not based on a feeling of looking for protection from a father figure, will be able to open up to the fatherhood of God who breaks our human schemes and plans and calls us to take up our responsibility.

Another obstacle in addressing God as father flows from the fact that contemporary cultures that have a patriarchal stamp are in crisis. Technology and progress make it impossible today for paternal domination to maintain its force, and the father figure is fading more and more because of the social division of labor. Yet despite the fact that this holds true at the level of sociology, still from the perspective of anthropology the father figure is not entirely finished. It does continue to provide some basic values and, in a changing world, it is called upon to assume new features.

Critiques of the father figure and the way it functions in religion point to the fact that it flows out of two profound energies in human existence: desire and fear. It cannot be denied that faith in God can be experienced in an unhealthy way. But it must also be said

that a blind faith that can accept God's incomprehensible ways while still embracing them freely and responsibly leads one to a maturity that goes beyond any possible conditioning from the human powers of desire or fear.

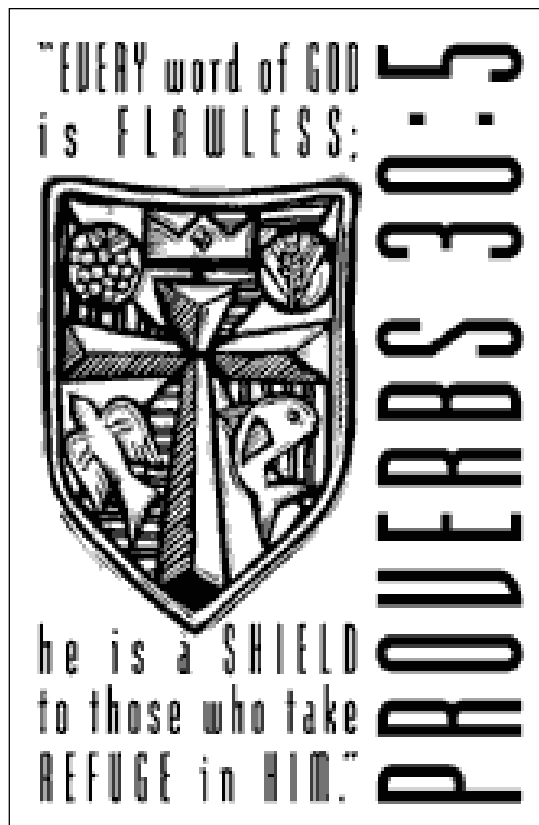
Finally, it must be recognized that our culture is centered on the father figure and on masculine values. It is limiting to express the reality of God only from this perspective because God surpasses any designation based on sex or gender.

When we say "Father" we want to profess the ultimate mystery that penetrates and sustains the universe of personal beings, the mystery of love and communion. This reality expressed through the symbol of Father could just as well be expressed through the symbol of Mother. Whether it is the expression of Father or of Mother, they both point toward the same reality.

At the present time, as our culture is losing its patriarchal character, masculine symbols are giving way to expressions of God which draw on the feminine. Already in Scripture there appear feminine traits of God. Thus the prophet Isaiah paints Yahweh's love with maternal strokes: "As a mother comforts her son, so will I comfort you." (Is 66:13) "Can a mother forget her infant, be without tenderness for the child of her womb? Even should she forget, I will never forget you." (Is 49:15)

God goes far beyond sexual and gender differences.

God is not male because we speak of the divine as Father. Nor is God female because we use the name Mother. Nor is



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God bisexual because we acknowledge that it is theologically legitimate, or anthropologically necessary, or culturally opportune to use feminine images or metaphors just as much as masculine ones whenever we speak of God.¹⁵

4. Daughters and Sons of the same Father-Mother

In the "Our Father" we express the community dimension of salvation history. The "Presentation" section of the Puebla document underlined this community aspect through the binomial expression "communion – sharing."

Puebla, moreover, is a spirit, a spirit of communion and sharing that, like a main theme, appeared in the preparatory

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documents and inspired the Conference's working sessions. In the preparatory documents we stated that the theological-pastoral theme in the Working Document is made up of two complementary poles: communion and sharing. Full evangelization tries to restore and deepen communion with God and, as an equally essential element, communion among human beings, to the extent that as man and woman live their filiation in brotherhood and sisterhood they would be the living image of God within the Church and the world in their capacity as active subjects of history.¹⁶

This community aspect of salvation history¹⁷ needs to be re-read within this existential context: the fact that people seek ways of brotherhood/sisterhood and the world wants to be one, but at the same time the reality is that these longings are ignored or denied. God's project is that from a mass of human beings we would become a People, a family made up of interlinking bonds of love, brotherhood/sisterhood, forgiveness, solidarity and communion. In this way our pilgrimage toward the Father's house, which takes place in the innermost intimacy of each one's heart, must then be extended to the believing community and then reach out to all of humanity.

The jubilee, centered on the person of Christ, thus becomes a great act of praise to the Father: "Blessed be the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ, who has blessed us in Christ with every spiritual blessing in the heavenly places." (Eph 1:3)¹⁸

Questions for personal and community reflection

1. What are the main conclusions that you draw for your personal, community, and apostolic life from the revelation of God as Father/Mother?
2. What difficulties can still prevent one from accepting feminine traits in God?
3. What practical consequences for the life of the Church flow from this new perspective of the masculine/feminine face of God?

Chapter Two

To Live and Give Witness to the Experience of God

It is not enough to acknowledge that Jesus has revealed to us that God is Father-Mother.

This truth must penetrate our lives and be transformed into a faith experience, as font and foundation of our Christian and religious life. We are called, in the year consecrated to the Father as preparation for the Jubilee Year of 2000, to renew our experience of God.

“The experience of God is the profound, loving and obscure (through faith) intimacy with the living God.” ... It is the living conviction, experienced “imprecisely” (St. John of the Cross) in the depths of one’s spirit, beyond sensing and reasoning, that the God of Jesus is present within us, within others, and in history as well as in nature. This presence is experienced as merciful and freeing. To contemplate God is to know in a living and experiential way that we are in God’s hands.”¹⁹

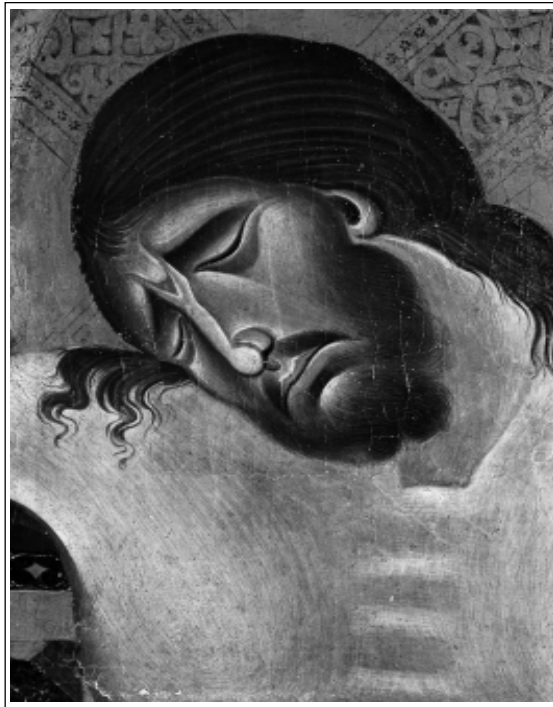
1. Meaning and extent of the experience

“Experience” remains a word open to a great deal of discus-

sion because of its wide range of meaning. Experience points to something concrete which has become something universal through the process of abstraction which ends up in a synthesis. Experience begins in receiving and registering impressions produced by all the things we come into contact with throughout our life. In experience we find all the dimensions of human knowledge: vision, observation, real contact with things outside ourselves, intuition, and understanding.

Etymologically (at least according to one of the possible etymologies), “experience” indicates the knowledge that human beings acquire when they “move out” of themselves and study an object from all angles. Based on this image, “experience” is a word composed of the preposition *ex* and the ancient meaning of the Latin verb *periri*: to try, to test, to be in danger. Thus, there is an underlying connection in the word with danger, testing,

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*Crucifix, 1268-71
by Cimabue, San
Domenico, Arezzo.*

**Religious
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attempting.

Experience means knowledge acquired through contact with reality which is turned into an awareness of everything that one is and everything that one lives, or, to put it another way, an awareness of what has been experienced in the past and what has been received in the transmission of one's culture.

The process of experiencing does not refer to theoretical knowledge but rather to that knowledge acquired from contact with concrete reality from which ideas and images are distilled and refined. There remains always a subjective element in experience – the assumption that the person exists and is aware of the outside world. And there is also an objective element – the object experienced. Experience is based on the two of these encountering each other, with changes taking place both in consciousness and in the object.

Models which are already present in the consciousness will be examined, checked, confirmed, corrected, modified, enriched, erased, etc. by the object encountered. This is why experience can be painful as well as creative. This encounter gives rise to a perspective and horizon of understanding which is transformed into lived experience by the feelings and attitudes generated within us.

2. The Experience of God as “experiential experience”

According to the philosopher Jean Mouroux, we can distinguish three types of experience: (1) empirical experience – on the surface, (2) experimental experience – something more conscious, and (3) experiential experience – fully personal, lucid, and affective which engages the person. Religious experience is always an experiential experience because it involves grasping a reality that does not belong to the realm of ordinary experience. It involves perceiving God through signs. It means experiencing a relationship with God. It includes contemplating the whole of internal and external reality, personal and collective reality, as related to God.

Religious experience means experiencing how the “I-Thou” relationship guides us to others, guides us to “The Other,” to the “Eternal Thou.” It means interpreting life, the world, and history from the standpoint of this “Eternal Thou.”

Religious experience has a community dimension because we are all going toward God

and each of us encounters him inasmuch as we are relational beings, and this relational part of us implies that we cannot be truly separated from others. We are speaking of an experiential experience that embraces the whole of life: thinking, acting, relating with others. It springs from a radical experience whereby one accepts God as Lord, and this consequently makes relative anything and everything else which might have been perceived as absolute. It represents a specific way of being in the world:

The whole person is involved when it comes to religious experience. All one's intelligence, because God is the first intelligence and the first intelligible, the very model of truth, the source of intellectual light, as well as because through images, ideas, and formulas a determined idea of God guides and nourishes the action and intelligence of the mind. All one's spiritual energy is involved, because in God human beings encounter the one. Being alone whom they can love and adore infinitely and, thus, the one unique object that corresponds to the extent of their desire. All one's freedom is likewise involved, because in religious experience we wager our future, decide our calling, while at the same time determining what the eternal means for us. All one's body and all one's actions are involved, because moral, cultural and social activity is the way religion has to be incarnated in life, a true commitment to serving God - in a word, the very truth of authentic religion.²⁰

3. Christian Experience

Christian experience is the experience of the God of Jesus Christ, far different from the experience of "the God of philosophers" or of "the God of pagans."

In Christ, as we have seen, God has shown who He is, who He wants to be, and who He will be for us. God wants to meet us in the person of Jesus and in his history. God offers us through Jesus a new life. The God of our Lord Jesus Christ manifests himself in history to establish and implant his Kingdom. God liberates, saves, and defends the poor. This is the Good News. God is beyond our control, cannot be manipulated, and loves gratuitously. God is Father who loves also the ungrateful and the wicked. (Cf. Lk 6:35) God draws close in his Reign to liberate the poor and to give confidence to sinners.

This is the Trinitarian God who is revealed and acts in history. The Father, source and origin of everything. The Son, Word of the Father, who reveals him and reveals his designs. The Holy Spirit, who guides all history toward the Father. In relationship with the Father, we are asked to give ourselves completely and confidently. In relationship to Jesus Christ, we are asked to follow him as the way to the Father. In relationship to the Spirit, our response should be one of docility to his action leading us to follow Jesus.

The postsynodal document *Vita Consecrata* underscores this experience of the triune God in consecrated life, present-

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ing in a special way through the evangelical counsels a reflection of trinitarian life:

The evangelical counsels are thus above all a gift of the Holy Trinity. The consecrated life proclaims what the Father, through the Son and in the Spirit, brings about by his love, his goodness and his beauty. ...

The deepest meaning of the evangelical counsels is revealed when they are viewed in relation to the holy Trinity, the source of holiness. They are in fact an expression of the love of the Son for the Father in the unity of the Holy Spirit. By practicing the evangelical counsels, the consecrated person lives with particular intensity the Trinitarian and Christological life. ...

Chastity ... is a reflection of the infinite love which links the three divine Persons in the mysterious depths of the life of the Trinity. ... Poverty proclaims that God is our only real treasure ... it becomes an expression of that total gift of self which the three divine Persons make to one another. ... Obedience, practiced in imitation of Christ, whose food was to do the Father's will (cf. Jn 4:34), shows the liberating beauty of a dependence which is not servile but filial ... which is a reflection in history of the loving harmony between the three divine Persons.²¹

4. The experience of God in the Bible

When we speak of the experience of God, we have to keep in mind the characteristics of what we could call the experience that stands as model, the experience of God according to the Bible.

The author of the Letter to the Hebrews begins the text stating that

in times past, God spoke in partial and various ways to our ancestors through the prophets; in these last days he spoke to us through his Son. (Heb 1:1-2)

The God of the Bible is revealed in nature (cf. Rom 1:18-23, Ps 19:2) and in history. The prophets, as men of the Word, transmit to the people their understanding of who God is, what he wants, and what he commands. Fragmentary revelations and partial experiences reach their fulfillment in the full manifestation that Jesus Christ accomplished. He, who is the Word of God made flesh, is God's revelation, self-manifestation, and communication. The Word of God gathers all human beings into one people, and as it brings them together it achieves their liberation. It transforms them into children of God and brothers and sisters to each other. God's Word, as read in history, judges and discerns between those who embrace it or reject it. The Word challenges us as it is constantly being communicated to us concretely through historical events.

There are three characteristics of the experience of God in the Bible: it is an experience in life; it is an experience for life; and it is the experience of someone always greater than ourselves.

4.1 An experience in life

The personal experience of God occurs, above all, in the search for human authenticity. In Abraham we can see concretely the steps in the process of experiencing God. We could, in fact, call him the prototype of the believer.

The first step in experiencing God is the effort one makes to be authentically a human person. Abraham, along with his father, served other gods. (Jos 24:2) But his search for the absolute and his faithfulness spurred him on to leave his country without even knowing where he was going (cf. Heb 11:8) and to keep on going despite the fact that he did not find the certainty he had hoped for. It is precisely in the journey that Abraham experiences God: not having a son to be his heir, and similarly not possessing a land or home of his own, nevertheless he continues to seek. We see the same thing in the way he resolves everyday problems, such as the arguments among his shepherds, difficulties with Lot and with Abimelech, and blessing his son Isaac before he dies. Abraham walks in faith, with the simple and generous effort to act in accordance with what it meant to be a human being at that time, with the culture and customs of the times, and in the light of a limited understanding of history and the world.

The Jewish people saw crystallized in Abraham's experience



An image of Moses before the burning bush. (Virtual Church Gallery of Art)

what was certainly the experience of God that they, as a people, were having. And this is the same reading and understanding for us today: like Abraham, we will experience God, that is, we will have knowledge of God, existential knowledge of him arising out of contact with everyday reality, to the extent that we strive for an orthopraxis, that type of correct human behavior that would authentically make us human persons.

The biblical experience of God is in community. It takes place in a people and is passed on and narrated for the people. In the books of the Bible we find the experience that the Jewish people had of God turned into history: it is an experience always able to move the future forward and to keep

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experience.*

alive the dynamism that liberates from all slavery. This finds its expression starting with Exodus and going all the way through to the last books of the Old Testament. (Cf. Dn 9:15, Wis 10 and 11) Out of a situation of death (a people enslaved and oppressed) God makes life bud forth. Israel moves from slavery to service of God and of neighbor in love.

Yahweh's action of setting free became the central experience of God for the people. From it and relating back to it derived the great variety of religious feasts, along with their laws, rites, and narratives. Every religious reform or restoration was connected to the experience of being delivered from Egypt. The prophets constantly refer to it Psalms, prayers, and poetry make it their main theme.

In the New Testament, the early Christians experience God bringing the first deliverance to fulfillment in Christ. Jesus accomplishes liberation from all slavery Jesus' own experience of the Father is really along this same line. He thus calls into question the Law, the traditions, and structures of dominance. He calls for a new attitude – a liberated and liberating attitude – with regard to God, to other people, and to the world. Christ makes everything subject to the greatest expression of freedom, that is, love.

The experience of God found in the Bible outlines the pattern of our own experience. Our experience of God cannot skip over the steps of crisis that call into question, make judgments and discernments about, purify and allow growth and progress in our knowledge of God whom

no one has ever seen (cf. Jn 1:18) and who is always new and different. "I had heard of you by word of mouth, but now my eye has seen you." (Jb 42:5)

4.2 An experience for life

The experience of God in the Bible is not only an experience that comes from life. It is, moreover and always, an experience that leads to a commitment for life. This commitment takes place, particularly, in relation to our neighbor. Love for our sister or brother is, at one and the same time, the way to experience God and to express authenticity.

From this there flows an impulse to transform history, collaborating with God for the advent of the Kingdom. Love for brother and sister is the way to experience God and is also an expression of this experience.

In various ways the prophets expressed this experience of God in the love for neighbor. We find in the prophetic writings various concepts that come out of life and that constitute a criterion for discerning the authenticity of an experience of God. Among these the one that stands out is "knowledge of Yahweh," a concept which points to an existential relationship with God that profoundly commits a person to one's neighbor as well. "True knowledge of Yahweh" is dispensing "justice to the weak and poor." (Jer 22:16) Micah sums up the consequences of an authentic experience of God, when he writes

You have been told, O man, what is good, and what the Lord requires of you: only to do the right and to love

goodness, and to walk humbly with your God. (Mi 6:8)

There is another idea, related to the preceding one, that also concerns experiencing God. It is what we might call “inner religion” or “authentic religion.” In exercising justice, or law, or mercy, an individual meets God and comes to a “knowledge of Yahweh.” Together with faith, this is the basis of true religion. There is no place here for those pseudo-experiences of God, such as formalism or ritualism, that seek to calm one’s conscience. A real experience of God comes from integrating faith and love of neighbor. (Cf. Jer 9:22-23)

We find this same teaching, in a much more perfect form, in John’s Gospel. The evangelist writes his Gospel and letters out of a profound experience of what communion with God is in the human experience of fraternal life. Faith and love are for John the criteria by which to measure if there exists a real communion with God or if it is merely an experience of the imagination and thus devoid of any real content. (Cf. Jn 3:16; 1 Jn 4:11-20)

Experiencing God in history, the people of Israel understood the need to change it. History thus opened up before them as a promise and an achievement. Thoroughly human and just laws sprang forth from experiencing a just and liberating God. (Cf. Dt 15:1-18)

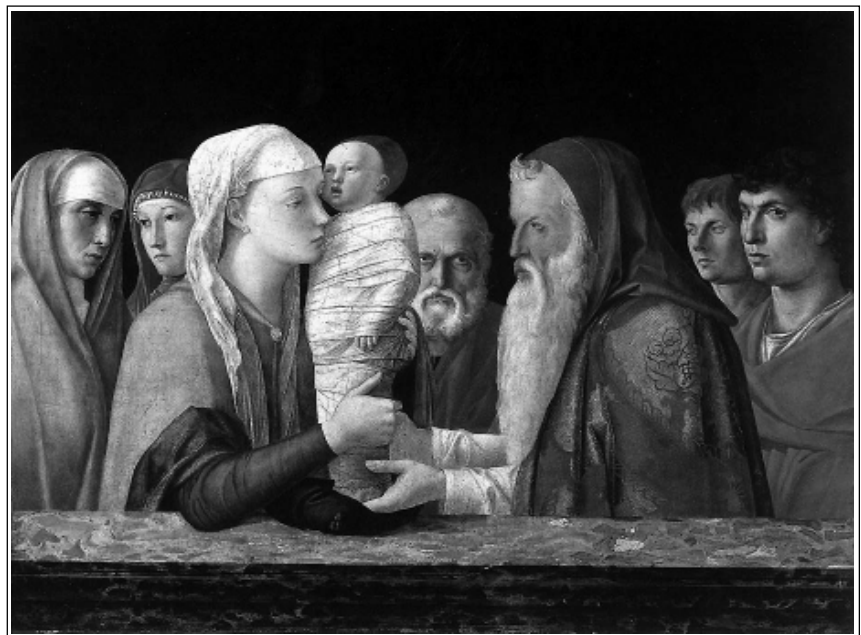
The prophets stand as the prototype of biblical man or woman. Rooted as they were in history, they projected their message into the future. As men of a deep experience of God,

they criticized unjust social structures that led to oppression of the poor. They judged that an experience of God that leads to maintaining selfishness, or injustice, or oppression of the neighbor is simply inauthentic. We must all struggle and work for a society based on Yahweh’s law and, consequently, on regulating just social relationships. (Cf. Jer 21:11-22:4)

The prophets sought laws and judgments that demonstrate consideration for the rights and needs of society’s weakest members. Only by means of that type of justice for women and men can there be a genuine and deep relationship with God (Cf. Jer 22:15-16, Ez 34:2-4)

In the New Testament the experience of God, which Christ communicates to us, highlights the Kingdom already present and breaking through into our world. The Kingdom is a reality in process, having as its goal liberation from all slavery. It becomes more and more con-

A real experience of God comes from integrating faith and love of neighbor.



*Presentation at the Temple, 1460-64 by Bellini
Galleria Querini Stampalia, Venice*

*In biblical
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nor God's thoughts
our thoughts.*

crete as partial and imperfect goals are achieved. For these, human collaboration is indispensable. All of this involves the need to change the course of history and to modify anything opposed to the universal reign of justice, love and peace among people. Those who believe in Christ are called to follow in the way of Jesus in service to the Kingdom. Christ's experience of God offers believers a challenge not only to proclaim the Kingdom but also to work toward making it real in history, bearing the struggles and contradictions that Jesus himself bore.

4.3 An experience of someone always greater

In biblical experience God always appears as someone new and disconcerting. God's ways are not our ways, nor God's thoughts our thoughts. (Cf. Is 55:8-9, Rom 11:33-35) The biblical experience of God remains something subject to constant purification. The attitude of seeking characterizes biblical men and women. One must always be en route. No particular step in the history of the People of God represents journey's end. Some new revelation, some new experience of God sparks a new and unforeseen setting out. The journey will end when we see God "as he is." (1 Jn 3:2) The future will always be more and greater than the present. We must journey toward God setting out, like Abraham, from our own land and giving up what we have been accomplishing and achieving, while renouncing one experience of God so as to be open to another even greater one.

5. Three ways to experience God

The biblical experience of God has shown us three ways to experience him: in creation, other persons, and history.

5.1 Experiencing God in creation

We can experience God in the cosmos and in the deepest reality of being. This experience is usually called cosmological-ontological. It is an experience of God that starts from the well-established and unique basis of plurality and mutability or, as we might say, from an analysis of being itself. It is this experience that leads to the famous five philosophical proofs for the existence of God. The cosmological-ontological experience also takes in experiencing God in the contemplation of creation, of the beauty of the universe, and of order and harmony in the world. This way of experiencing God in creation occurred far more often in the past than it does now, but it does represent an authentic way of experiencing God.

5.2 Experiencing God in the human person

Another way to experience God is the one called anthropological – transcendental. It traces its origin to the loss of the sense of permanent harmony or order in the universe which has consequently caused human beings to look within themselves for the certainty and security that the cosmos no longer provides. It is within himself or herself and in other human beings that one experiences God while yearning for the infinite and opening oneself

up to the infinite.

One of the characteristics of present day theology, and thus of present day spirituality, is a strong anthropological approach which stresses encountering God within the human. Without denying the validity or possibility of other ways of experiencing God in reality and in history, today the emphasis is on the fact that the human is where the divine is revealed, starting above all with the incarnation of the Son of God.

The human person is a synthesis of creation, fulfilled in and for the Word (Col 1:15-16, Jn 1:3) and, therefore, the person possesses in oneself a sacredness that comes from God. Within the universe, a human being is the one who hears the word of God and replies to it in the name of all other creatures, as a kind of spokesperson for God. God is present in every human person, and we can find God in every human person. Experiencing God in the sister or the brother has its basis in Revelation and is a gift "Christianity is the only religion where we find God in man and woman, especially in the weakest."²²

—**The basis for this experience**

The first basis for the possibility of experiencing God in a human being we find in the fact of the Incarnation. By means of the incarnation God took on our human condition. From that point on our encounter with God takes place in and through the humanity of Jesus Christ. The risen Christ penetrates the whole of reality, guiding from within the process of transforming the universe.



The human person, created in the image and likeness of God (Gen 1:26-27), is called to be conformed to the image of the Son. (Rom 8:29) Thus it follows, in a special way, that the human being reveals Christ through whom, in whom, and for whom he or she was created. Thanks to the Incarnation and the Resurrection every human person has become, in a certain way, a sacrament of Christ revealing him or concealing him to a greater or lesser degree.

The New Testament speaks to us of this real and varied presence of God in our sister and brother Jesus identifies himself with the apostles (Mt 10:40, Jn 13:20), and he is present in believers. (Jn 14:23, 17:23) They live "in Christ." The Lord's presence is not limited to those who believe in him; he is present in every human being.

Thanks to the Incarnation and the Resurrection every human person has become, in a certain way, a sacrament of Christ revealing him or concealing him to a greater or lesser degree.

(Mt 25:31-46) By his incarnation, the Son of God “has become united in a certain sense to every human being.”²³ He is present in non-Christians and non-believers with a hidden presence, guiding their search, encouraging and supporting their efforts toward achieving goodness and truth, inspiring all their work in favor of fraternity, justice and peace.²⁴ We can also speak of a presence of Christ who shows his face and makes appeal in a definite way in people considered not individually but rather as members of groups that have played or play a decisive role at different times in history or

who have represented a particular problem or crisis. Today we would call those groups a “social subject.”

Jesus Christ who is close to us, present in every human being, “wanted to identify himself with special tenderness with the weakest and the poorest,”²⁵ as the text of Mt 25:31-46 shows so clearly. Rereading this passage has been illuminating for believers who, in many parts of the world, live in situations of inhuman poverty and institutional violence.

In the light of this Gospel text they have rediscovered in the poor and marginalized the suffering features of Christ’s face, the face of the one who calls out and challenges the world.²⁶

Chapter Three

From Experiencing God to Commitment to Justice

Tertio Millennio Adveniente, recalling that Jesus came “to proclaim the Good News to the poor” (Mt 11:5, Lk 7:22), highlights how important experiencing God as Father is to have a commitment to justice and peace “in a world like ours, marked by so many conflicts and intolerable social and economic inequalities.”

And the document describes such a commitment as “a necessary condition for the preparation of the jubilee.”²⁷

In its “Propositions,” the recent Synod for America also pointed to these social aspects of conversion: “It will be necessary to work in a concrete way toward a growing awareness of each person’s dignity and consequently to call attention within the faith community to the need to participate in political activity according to the Gospel.”²⁸ Along this line the Synod pledged itself to defend indigenous and African-American cultures.²⁹ This same conviction infuses *Propositions* 72-76, which treated respectively the problem of human rights, the preferential option for the poor, economic globalization, international debt, the arms race, and the culture of death.

Vita Consecrata, for its part, gives guidelines toward a preferential option for the poor and for justice.³⁰

“A renewed appreciation and more intense celebration of the sacrament of Penance in its most profound meaning”³¹ will help to understand the sacraments’ structure of grace in the face of society’s structures of sin. This sacrament, as the place of reconciliation of the human person with God the Father, also leads to reconciliation with others. In the sacrament we experience the Lord’s love and mercy. Likewise we die with Christ to sin and selfishness. And all this should also be made manifest in a commitment toward a more just and human society.

The eucharist is also closely connected with the commitment to continual conversion and



*"God Separates Light from Darkness," Raphael 1517
Palazzi Pontifici, Vatican.*

Created in the image of God, human beings are called to "have dominion" over the earth (Gen 1:26), organizing the world and living together with others, serving God as son or daughter.

necessary purification which consecrated persons bring to maturity in the sacrament of reconciliation. By their frequent encounter with God's mercy, they purify and renew their hearts, and through the humble recognition of their sins, achieve openness in their relationship with him. The joyful experience of sacramental forgiveness on the journey shared with one's brothers and sisters makes the heart eager to learn and encourages growth in faithfulness.³²

1. Reflecting the merciful face of the Father by defending human dignity

One of the "signs of the times" is without doubt the growing awareness of the dignity of the human person which has succeeded in highlighting human values and their requirements as expressed in rights and duties.

While on the one hand the Christian view of man and

woman expresses their grandeur and dignity in revealed terms, it leads us on the other to appreciate and defend everything that is authentically human. Created in the image of God, human beings are called to "have dominion" over the earth (Gen 1:26), organizing the world and living together with others, serving God as son or daughter. The Puebla Document expressed this Christian view of the human person in a synthetic fashion affirming:

Freedom always implies the ability that we all have in principle to direct ourselves toward establishing a communion and a sharing which must take shape concretely on three inseparable levels: man's relation with the world as its master, with other persons as a brother, and with God as a son.³³

Human values are at the service of these three dimensions, and they are developed and accomplished as the three levels are acted on. Organizing the world, promoting human relationships, and recognizing God as Father will foster the growth of the human person. When this growth is blocked by any obstacle in the triple relational pattern, not only are man and woman prevented from living their earthly vocation, but the image of God which exists in them is also obscured and profaned, and thus a situation of social sin results.

After Vatican II and in line with the growing awareness of the problems of injustice regarding human dignity, Latin American believers began to see with greater clarity "the scandal and the contradiction of being

Christian,”³⁴ which refers to those countries “where basic human rights – life, education, living conditions, work – are frequently not respected and where there is an ongoing violation of the dignity of the human person.”³⁵

Out of this there arose, along with a prophetic denunciation, the demand for a rapid and profound transformation of structures, since they are already called by their very nature (1) to control the evil that comes from the human heart and that also shows up on the level of society, and (2) to serve as the pedagogical setting for an interior conversion involving the values we are talking about here.

2. Central values of the human person

In the structure of the human person “the value of intellect, free will, conscience and fraternity stand out.”³⁶ This last value of brotherhood/sisterhood is based on equality and is expressed in solidarity. These elements foster the dignity of the human person and the fact that human dignity surpasses everything else. We also see here the basis for universal and inviolable human rights and duties, among which freedom stands out.

Intellect is a human value because it makes human beings aware of themselves and of other things. By means of it they share in God’s intellect and become able to know God, to discover him in creation, in people, and in events. Human beings become hearers of the “word-world” and can make all

things return to God as in the form of a response.³⁷ By their intellect humans organize the world and society. Art, science, and technology are possible thanks to human intelligence. Because of it, a person has the right to truth, to an education, to express personal points of view so as to contribute to discovering the meaning of the world and, especially, to knowing the truth. By the same token, a person has the duty to use intelligence for the good of others in the transformation of the world.

Besides the ability to know, human beings have been given the ability to love and to choose by means of a free will. By means of free will one can embrace or reject goodness and truth.

In the depths of his conscience man discovers that a law exists that he has not himself written but one which he must obey and whose voice echoes in his heart, whenever necessary, reminding him that he must love and do good just as he must also avoid evil.³⁸

Human dignity similarly requires respect for freedom and for education toward the right use of freedom. Human beings have the right to act out of inner conviction without external coercion preventing them from doing so. Using their freedom, on the other hand, they have the right and the obligation to form and acquire a right conscience which would illumine their decisions. What they decide should take into account the common good because human freedom has not only an individual dimension but also a community one.

Human beings become hearers of the “word-world” and can make all things return to God as in the form of a response.



*"God the Creator and Angels," Pietro Perugino
Stanza dell'Incendio di Borgo, Palazzi*

Humans experience that they are related to the world, to God, and to others. The most basic category of being human is "you-ness." We are made for the other and must experience relationship with the other by means of sympathy which leads to a communion based on equality and fraternity. There does not exist simply one basic word, "I," but two: "I-You" in relationships between persons, and "I-It" in relationships of people with things. In the "I-You" relationship there is an encounter between persons which leads to a commitment from which flows "We," and this is nourished and fostered in the "between," that is, in the love relationship between persons.

Material beings, on the other hand, are incapable of a dialogical response, and therefore the "I-It" relationship involves possession or dominance,

something that cannot occur between human persons.³⁹ Starting with this basis, a human being appears intimately linked to other human beings and is called to construct with them a more brotherly-sisterly world, with greater bonds of solidarity, in all its dimensions: interpersonal, economic, political, and social.

This right to communion and sharing includes the obligation to organize society in such a way that, by means of a true social justice, people can live in accordance with their dignity and develop human values for everyone's benefit, in respect for their rights and in the responsible exercise of their duties.

3. Latin America and human values

We stated earlier that human values are expressed in rights and obligations and are nourished through their exercise. Now as we just pointed out, the human person possesses a social character. It is in relationship with other people and with things that each one of us lives human values, develops our qualities, and accomplishes our mission.

There is an interdependence between the human person and society. While on the one hand human beings structure ways of living and working together, on the other hand structured society affects human beings. This results in sometimes fostering, sometimes hindering growth in living out human values, in respect for human rights and their exercise, and in the requirement to accomplish one's

duties.

When society gets organized, either a just or an unjust hierarchy of values will be established. When, over and above the “central values” we have listed, others are added, then we run the risk of institutionalizing the violation of human dignity. This happens when unlimited wealth and profit without social obligation take first place in a world of economic globalization and unbridled neoliberalism, or when an ideology that leaves no room for exercising authentic freedom is imposed by force, or when the majority’s sharing in decision-making is suppressed, which brings in its wake enormous inequity in the distribution of basic social benefits. It is clear that in such situations there so easily result violations of rights and human values which Puebla defines as “social sin”⁴⁰ and “institutionalized violence.”⁴¹

It is evident that what is happening in Latin America, although there are common elements, varies from country to country. Overall, to a greater or lesser extent, the fact is that everywhere we find enormous majorities of people living in sub-human conditions that diminish them as human beings and prevent them from developing or exercising their basic rights and duties. Thus they are condemned

to remain on the edge of life: hunger, chronic diseases, illiteracy, impoverishment, injustice in international relations and especially in commercial trading, situations of economic and cultural neocolonialism that are at times just as cruel as

political colonialism....⁴²

To this we would have to add the abuse of power we see in armed regimes, systematic or selective repression, torture, exile, the absence of sharing in society at various levels. In a word, the economic, social and political situation of Latin America in most cases does not constitute a suitable setting for respecting, exercising or developing human values.

In the light of “Communion and Sharing” – an expression that sums up essential human values in a Christian perspective – the social situation of Latin America is scandalous: instead of communion, great majorities of people are marginalized; instead of sharing, the gap between rich and poor grows wider and wider:

the Synod calls attention to the social sins that cry to heaven, because they engender violence, they destroy peace and harmony between communities in the same country, between countries, and between different parts of the continent: the drug trade and the laundering of dirty money that results from it, corruption at all levels, the terror that stems from violence, the arms race, ethnic discrimination, inequities between groups of people, and the irrational destruction of nature.⁴³

When we analyze this situation at depth we discover that it is not some passing or accidental phase, but rather the product of economic, social and political situations and structures.

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the human person demands a change in society in order to safeguard the most basic human rights. On the other hand, forces of resistance exist that would like to preserve the status quo to maintain a set-up that privileges minority groups making them insensitive to the demands of justice and the rights of the majority. These power groups use the communication media, pressure governments, exercise repressive force, justify their actions with ideology, and dismiss as subversive activity any attempt to change the present situation.

The growing social sensitivity and Christian awareness that this type of structure indeed runs contrary to God's plan has resulted in creating in believers the conviction that, together with personal conversion, we must strive for a transformation of society as one of the requirements of following Jesus Christ and that we must respond to the globalization of the economy with a globalization of solidarity.

Solidarity is the result of communion which itself is based on the mystery of God, one and triune, and on the Son of God who became incarnate and died for all. Solidarity is expressed in Christian charity which seeks the good of others, especially of those most in need. In order to live according to this solidarity in the Church in America we propose...that, starting from the Gospel, the culture of solidarity be promoted and the most appropriate initiatives to help the poor and other marginalized be studied; that nations and international organizations be exhorted to establish an economy in which

striving for the common national and international good would prevail along with universal distribution of goods and the total promotion of people, and not only economic gain.⁴⁴

4. Social change in order to live human values in communion and sharing

When analyzing social systems in today's world, believers have discovered a fact that differs from a commonly held belief. They have found that those who are oppressed and whose rights and values are trampled on, those who are kept down in all kinds of terrible conditions and enslaved in unjust structures are not just some few isolated individuals. What we are talking about here are millions of human beings, human beings living on a Catholic continent.

In the face of this, they have come to understand that not only a personal conversion is required, but also

profound structural changes that respond to the people's legitimate yearnings for true social justice; changes that have either not taken place or have been excessively slow in the experience of Latin America.⁴⁵

After one becomes aware of the unjust situation in which great majorities of people live, the first step toward social change is *prophetic denunciation* of the structures that prevent Latin Americans from achieving their basic rights which are usually trampled down by violence,

marginalization, and exploitation. This denunciation is becoming more and more objective, courageous, and evangelical and is being joined to the proclamation of every person's basic rights as an indispensable part of evangelization. Along this line, the Synod for America spoke with prophetic voice. Human rights are similarly jeopardized by the injustice of the international system which should also be denounced at the same time that efforts are being expended for building a more just international order.

The Church has become aware ... that her evangelizing mission has as an indispensable part the activity of justice and the tasks of promoting man.⁴⁶

5. A change which would lead to communion and sharing as children of the same Father

The binomial phrase "communion and sharing" expresses in a synthesizing way how human values and the responsible exercise of a person's rights and duties can be achieved concretely. Communion can exist only when human dignity is respected, when there is a minimum of social justice, when discrimination is eliminated and when fraternity is being lived. On the other hand, sharing requires the exercise of freedom and the possibility of an education that helps toward the growth of the person and the formation of conscience.

From a Christian point of

view, communion and sharing represent a dimension of the Kingdom of God making its way through history. We also have here a dimension of God's project touching the relational part of an individual and deeply transforming it. In fact, the human ability to enter into relation is called upon, in relationship to God, to move from fatalism to the responsibility of a daughter or son. It is called upon, in relationship with others, to reject forming separated and internally divided groups and to build, instead, a family, a people. In relationship with this world's goods, it is called upon to refuse to be dominated by them or to dominate others so as to possess even more material goods; and it is further called upon to use these goods in freedom, sharing them with others within just societies.

Communion and sharing are, at the same time, a gift and a proposal from God. Inasmuch as gift, communion and sharing are either accepted or rejected. As a proposal they require human cooperation, the use of necessary means to become a reality in the area of social relations. It is not enough to accept God's project theoretically and denounce whatever does not agree with it, considering this as guarantee for human values and dignity. One must actually get down to using all the means necessary to transform those structures that prevent communion and sharing.

When we come to concrete means we inevitably find conflict in the efforts put forth to change and transform social structures. Christian charity

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cannot fail to recognize or deny the existence of opposing interests that breed divisions, confrontations, and struggles. In fact Christian love should embrace them from the position of power it possesses, which is greater than the divisions. And thus in the struggle for a more just world in which everyone's human values are respected, it will be possible even to overcome the hatred which would result in crushing the rights and values of those who were originally the oppressors. Change must lead to reconciliation even when people have to experience tensions and conflicts to "put into practice bold and deeply innovative transformations" and to undertake, "without further delay, urgent reforms."⁴⁷

"True communion and sharing can exist in this life only when they are pursued on the level of temporal realities."⁴⁸ Thus, working for the creation of just and human societies means working so that communion and sharing will move forward, imperfectly perhaps but really, in the world.

6. Social change from the standpoint of preferential option for the poor

The preferential option for the poor made by the Church of Vatican II has been continually reaffirmed ever since then. The Synod for America, in its Proposition 73, speaks of this option in strong tones. It presents it as the result of a conversion:

To listen to the poor requires a true conversion. Listening to

them is a requirement of our faith in Jesus Christ.... The whole Church in America must incarnate in its pastoral projects the universal Church's solidarity with the poor and outcast of whatever class. It should make a habit of assistance, promotion, liberation, and fraternal welcome.... The Church must live with the poor and share in their suffering. It must continue to denounce the causes of poverty, walking with the poor in their struggle for liberation helping them to be in solidarity with each other and, united with other organizations, to confront challenges to improve their situation. The Church must promote any and all activities that can transform the mentality and structures that are responsible for their situation. Finally, the Church must prove in its lifestyle, priorities, words and deeds that it is in communion and solidarity with them.⁴⁹

A Church that opts for the poor is a Church that undergoes conversion and changes its place in society so as to rethink the content of the message of the Good News from the new standpoint as well as to take on a consistent way of acting which will make communion and sharing possible. Communion and sharing are built on *liberation from* all the slaveries that tear human beings and human society apart (the source of these slaveries is selfishness: personal and social sin). They are also built on *liberation for* a progressive growth in communion with God and others that will reach perfection beyond this world's horizon. This liberation is achieved in history, in whatever is social, political,

economical, or cultural, and in the ensemble of their relations. In the gradual liberation *from* slavery and *for* growth, a structure will become possible that would foster and defend human values and rights, up to now trampled down by the idolatry of wealth, power, the state, sex, and pleasure. Liberation from the idol of wealth will make an economy at the service of people possible, without the cruel contrasts of luxury and dire poverty. Liberation from the power that oppresses and represses will help to create structures that respect a person's dignity and that offers unlimited possibilities for everyone to make free decisions. Liberation from the idol of sex and pleasure will bring an end to exploiting and using people.⁵⁰

7. Consecrated Life and preferential option for the poor

The option for the poor is inherent in the very structure of love lived in Christ. All of Christ's disciples are therefore held to this option; but those who wish to follow the Lord more closely, imitating his attitudes, cannot but feel involved in a very special way.⁵¹

Vita Consecrata relates this preferential option for the poor with experiencing God in our

sisters and brothers "since the Christ encountered in contemplation is the same who lives and suffers in the poor."⁵²

In a special way, consecrated life has as its mission to reflect the face of the Father of mercies and to make him present not only through a feeling of compassion toward the suffering, but with a concrete and effective love that is the sign and the instrument of God the Father-Mother revealed by Jesus Christ.

This last year of preparation for the Jubilee Year 2000 should be an occasion to renew our authentic experience of God and to witness to it in our life and in our work.

Questions for personal and community reflection

1. How can we deepen our experience of the maternal-paternal face of God, and how can we share this experience in our communities?
2. How can we show God's merciful face to others, especially to the poorest?
3. What can we do so that the globalization of solidarity can be experienced and lived in the present-day circumstances of our people?



"God Sends Gabriel to the Virgin," Giotto di Bondone, 1306, Caappella Scrovegni, Padua

Conclusion

Mary, the Maternal Face of God Model of Love for God, and Love for Neighbor

Latin American Episcopal Conference, meeting in Puebla, Mexico in 1979, dealing with the topic of present and future evangelization in Latin America, recalled the Marian character of the Latin American people from the very first proclamation of the Gospel in the sixteenth century:

Among our peoples the Gospel has been announced by presenting the Blessed Virgin Mary as its fullest realization. From the very beginning, in her apparition and the title of Guadalupe, Mary has represented the great sign: of a maternal and merciful face and of the nearness of the Father and of Jesus, with both of whom she invites us to come into communion. Mary was also the voice that urged union among people and between peoples. As at Guadalupe, the continent's other Marian shrines are signs of the encounter between the Church's faith and Latin American history.⁵³

We can assert that devotion to

Mary is an identifying element of Latin American Christianity, a vital and historical experience that belongs to its very identity. Just as any of the elements of Christian life, so Latin American Marian devotion has undergone an evolution affected by the changes that have taken place throughout the history of the continent. These changes have brought anthropological concepts from our time period and the problems flowing from them face to face with the image of the Virgin. Thus we see how Latin American devotion for Mary has had to move from the idea of Mary as "Conquistadora" to a liberating Mary, not without first living out deeply the concept of Mary as mother and protector of the oppressed.

These three focus points manage to get mixed together, to a greater or lesser degree, throughout the various stages of the history of the Latin American people. At a first point in time, the image prevailed of Mary the Conquistadora⁵⁴ and

Señora.⁵⁵ Emphasis came later on the maternal aspect of Mary: Mother of God and our Mother. And coming from the pastoral, theological and spiritual renewal which Vatican II initiated and which was taken up and broadened by Medellín, Puebla, and Santo Domingo, the principal way of looking at Mary, both at a pastoral level and at the level of theological reflection, is of a free and freeing (liberating) woman.

From all the things that have contributed to the way we look at Mary, the one that stands out from all the others without any doubt, is the event of Guadalupe. Ten years after the capture of Tenochtitlan, the capital of the Aztec empire, the apparition of the Virgin Mary took place on the hilltop of Tepeyac on the outskirts of Mexico City. This was the place where the native people venerated Tonantzin, the "Venerable Mother" goddess who had given birth to the god Huitzilopochtli. In the pantheon of Aztec gods



*"Madonna and Child with Two Angels,"
Fra Filippo Lippi,
1460, Uffizi Gallery,
Florence.*

This manifestation of Mary as maternal face of God began a new understanding of her role in the history of salvation and opened up new approaches for evangelizing.

and goddesses, Tonantzin is the primary figure who could be compared to the Virgin of Tepeyac.

Without going into the details of the narratives of the apparitions or the message Mary asked to be taken to Bishop Juan de Zumárraga, we could say that some important elements stand out that allow us to understand the change that was achieved regarding her who at a first point in time seemed to be a divinity who protected the conquerors.

The Virgin appears, first of all, as a "pious mother" who takes on the mestizo traits of the new people just then coming into existence, but she appears to an Indian. She speaks his language and assumes his culture's symbols, in this way recognizing the dignity of the indigenous people. She wants a shrine built on the edge of the town where the marginalized Indians were

then living,

so I can show and give all my love, compassion, help and defense, because I am your pious mother, yours and of all the people together who live in this land and of all the other people who love me, who call to me and who trust in me. I will listen there to all their cries and remedy all their miseries, pains and sufferings.⁵⁶

Mary immediately elicits Juan Diego's confidence, and he calls her "my Girl," "my smallest Daughter," "my little Maiden." He has understood Mary's nearness and her care:

Am I not here, I who am your Mother? Are you not under my shadow and protection? Am I not the source of your joy? Are you not in the hollow of my mantle, in the crossing of my arms? What more do you need?⁵⁷

This manifestation of Mary as maternal face of God began a new understanding of her role in the history of salvation and opened up new approaches for evangelizing. Everyone was called to come to the edge of town there to meet the Mother of the oppressed who, from within the midst of the poor and in solidarity with them, sets everyone free.

Guadalupe is not at all an isolated case. Through the length and breadth of Latin America, Marian devotion centers on images and titles whose history is always related to the poor and outcast: Indians, Blacks, despised people, slaves. There is no need to list here all the historical facts of the various Marian devotions in Latin America, but we would

underscore how in all of them Mary appears with profoundly maternal traits of being close and concerned about the misery and oppression of her children. This has left, even up to our own day, a deep imprint on the religiosity of the Latin American people who discover in her a reality so deeply human and holy that it arouses in believers prayers of tenderness, sorrow, and hope.⁵⁸

With a new light, liberating evangelization discovers Mary present in the life of Latin American believers.

Thus she appears as “the great sign: of a maternal and merciful face and of the nearness of the Father and of Jesus, with both of whom she invites us to come into communion,⁵⁹ as

a feminine presence that creates a family atmosphere, a willingness to welcome, a love and respect for life, a sacramental presence of the maternal traits of God,⁶⁰ and as “the strong bond that has kept faithful to the Church whole groups of people who have gone without adequate pastoral care.”⁶¹

In Latin America the people have felt identified with Mary, Mother of the oppressed. This happens today, however, in a different way, not just with an individualistic approach but also in a social way, as a people. So it is no longer only to experience comfort and consolation, but also and above all to make a commitment to evangelical liberation that aims at transforming society according to God’s project.

Present day Latin American experience emphasizes (because

it is responding to an existential need and perfectly corresponds to it) that Mary

was far from being a passively submissive woman or someone with an unappealing religiosity; she was rather a woman who did not hesitate to proclaim that God vindicates the humble and oppressed and casts down the mighty of this world from their thrones.⁶²

Marian devotion in the Latin American world is something, as we have seen, that belongs to the intimate religious and cultural identity of the people. Without trying to dismiss it, however, as pertaining only to the beginning period of evangelization, what we could say is that this devotion to Mary is undergoing positive changes today and is becoming more and more the source of a deeper evangelical and liberating Christianity.

The new evangelization that Pope John Paul II is calling for, “new in its fervor, new in its methods, and new in its expression,” is finding and must continue to find a renewed dynamism in the Marian devotion of Latin American believers who, without throwing aside the way the world around them is devoted to Mary as Mother of the oppressed and as close and compassionate, nevertheless will enrich that devotion with the new lights that the Spirit is bestowing. These are the lights that help us see Mary as the free and freeing woman, the Mother and Model who guides the believers who want to respond from their faith position to the challenges of the signs of the times, committing themselves to

a liberating evangelization.

In the Year dedicated to the Father, consecrated individuals will feel in Mary, who is the maternal face of God, an affectionate and urgent invitation to return to the Father’s house when they hear her mother’s voice, “Do whatever Jesus tells you.” (Cf. Jn 2:5)⁶³

Notes

1. John Paul II, Apostolic Letter: *Tertio Millennio Adveniente* (“As the Third Millennium Draws Near”), November 10, 1994, Number 49 [Hereafter abbreviated: TMA] This document can be found in *Origins*, Vol 24, No 24 (November 24, 1994).

2. TMA, 51.

3. TMA, 52.

4. TMA, 54.

5. John Paul II, Apostolic Exhortation: *Vita Consecrata* (“The Consecrated Life”), March 25, 1996, Number 17. This document can be found in *Origins*, Vol 25, No 41 (April 4, 1996).

6. Cf. *Vita Consecrata*, 82.

7. Cf. *Vita Consecrata*, 95.

8. Cf. *Vita Consecrata*, 102.

9. The *CMSM Forum*, “Witnesses of Christ in the World,” No. 80, Fall 1999.

10. The *CMSM Forum*, “Religious as a Sign of Sisterhood Brotherhood,” No. 82, Summer 2000.

11. TMA, 54.

12. TMA, 49.

13. Xavier Pikaza, “Padre” in *El Dios cristiano. Diccionario Teológico* [The entry “Father” in *The Christian God, Theological Dictionary*], Salamanca, 1992, p. 1005.

14. Cf. Vatican Council II, *Gaudium et Spes* [“Pastoral Constitution on the Church in the Modern

**“Do whatever
Jesus tells you.”
(Cf. Jn 2:5)**

- World”], December 7, 1965, no. 17.
15. Santiago del Cura Elena, quoted in L. González-Carvajal, ¡Noticias de Dios! [“News of God”], Santander (1997), p. 219.
 16. *Puebla*, “Working Paper,” Presentation, 3, 3.
 17. Cf. Vatican Council II, *Lumen Gentium* [“Dogmatic Constitution on the Church”], November 21, 1964, no. 9.
 18. *TMA*, 49.
 19. Segundo Galilea, *El camino de la espiritualidad* [“The Way of Spirituality”], Bogotá (1983), pp. 159-160.
 20. Jean Mouroux, *L’expérience chrétienne* [“Christian Experience”], Paris (1954).
 21. *Vita Consecrata*, 20-21.
 22. Segundo Galilea, *El seguimiento de Cristo* [“The Following of Christ”], Guadalajara (1979), p. 33.
 23. *Gaudium et Spes*, 22.
 24. Cf. Vatican Council II, *Ad Gentes* [“Decree on the Missionary Activity of the Church”], December 7, 1965, nn. 9, 12.
 25. *Puebla Document*, 196.
 26. Cf. *ibid.*, 31-39.
 27. *TMA*, 51.
 28. Synod for America, “Propositions,” 34.
 29. Synod for America, “Propositions,” 18-19.
 30. Cf. *Vita Consecrata*, 82.
 31. *TMA*, 50.
 32. *Vita Consecrata*, 95.
 33. *Puebla Document*, 322.
 34. *Puebla Document*, 28.
 35. *Puebla Document*, 41.
 36. *Gaudium et Spes*, 61.
 37. Cf. Romano Guardini, *Mundo y persona* [“The World and the Person”], Madrid (1963), pp. 212-213.
 38. *Gaudium et Spes*, 16.
 39. Cf. Martin Buber, *Ich und Du* [“I and Thou”], Leipzig, 1922.
 40. *Puebla Document*, 28 and 487.
 41. *Puebla Document*, 509.
 42. Paul VI, *Evangelii Nuntiandi* [Apostolic Exhortation on “Evangelization in Today’s World”], December 8, 1975, no. 30.
 43. Synod for America, “Propositions,” 70.
 44. Synod for America, “Propositions,” 67.
 45. *Puebla Document*, 30.
 46. John Paul II, “Opening Speech at the Puebla Assembly,” III, 2.
 47. *Puebla Document*, 327.
 48. *Puebla Document*, 1134.
 49. Synod for America, “Propositions,” 73.
 50. Cf. *Puebla Document*, 482-483, 491, 492-506.
 51. *Vita Consecrata*, 82.
 52. *Vita Consecrata*, 82.
 53. *Puebla Document*, 282.
 54. Literally “Woman conqueror,” the feminine form of the Spanish word “Conquistador.”
 55. Literally “Lady,” the feminine form of the Spanish word “Señor,” or “Lord.”
 56. Nican Mopohua, nn. 23-25. [This is the narrative in the Náhuatl language that begins with the two words “Here is told” and sets out to recount the miraculous apparitions of Mary to Juan Diego in December 1531. The reputed author is Antonio Valeriano who received the story from Juan Diego himself and wrote the account around the year 1560.]
 57. Nican Mopohua, 76.
 58. *Puebla Document*, 291.
 59. *Puebla Document*, 282.
 60. *Puebla Document*, 291.
 61. *Puebla Document*, 284.
 62. Paul VI, *Marialis Cultus* [Apostolic Exhortation “For the Right Ordering and Development of Devotion to the Blessed Virgin Mary”], February 2, 1974, n. 37.
 63. Cf. *TMA*, 54.