

1999

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#### Recommended Citation

Serra, Aristide M. (1999) "Poverty of Spirit and the "Marvelous Deeds" of God as Seen in Mary's Magnificat: Reflections from the Hebrew Scriptures," *Marian Studies*: Vol. 50, Article 5.  
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# POVERTY OF SPIRIT AND THE MARVELOUS DEEDS OF GOD AS SEEN IN MARY'S MAGNIFICAT: REFLECTIONS FROM THE HEBREW SCRIPTURES

*Aristide M. Serra, O.S.M.\**

## Introduction

The Magnificat—so called by the word with which it begins in Latin—is the song which expresses the character of the Virgin Mary. It is found in the Gospel of Luke 1,46–55. In it we can detect the sense of praise and wonder which the miracle of the virginal conception of the Son of God produced within Mary: virginal in the sense that her womb became fruitful, not as the law of nature ordained, but through the exclusive intervention of the Holy Spirit, the power of God, with whom nothing is impossible (Lk 1,37). That is the immediate context for this canticle in the design of the third Gospel.

A second consideration must be added to identify the context of the Magnificat. Luke wrote between 70 A.D. and 90 A.D., decades after the death and resurrection of the Lord. As he narrated the life and work of the pre-resurrection Jesus, Luke often anticipated in those accounts that which was understood only after the Lord's death and resurrection. Exegetes recognize many cases of such anticipation—among which is the Magnificat. That song expresses not only what Mary experienced in herself when the Word made his abode in her womb, but also how Luke believed Mary understood and pondered that event after Jesus rose from the dead. The Magnificat is then

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an authoritative document giving Mary's prayer and meditation in the light of the Paschal mystery.<sup>1</sup>

The Virgin Mary—so Luke assures us—formed part of the primitive Christian community of Jerusalem (Acts 1,14). That Church was the first to hear the preaching of the Apostles, who gave witness to the resurrection of Jesus. Its members “devoted themselves to the Apostles’ teaching” (Acts 2,45). Early writers, beginning with Origen,<sup>2</sup> tell us that Mary was attentive to the message of the preachers, with the preaching of the Twelve held in first place (cf. Lk 2,17-18). She was not content with witnessing the “stupendous marvels” (cf. Lk 2,18 and Acts 2,6-7; 3,10-12), but she also “kept all these things, pondering them in her heart” (Lk 2,19). In the light of the Paschal message proclaimed by the Apostles, Mary saw again the circumstances surrounding the birth of Jesus. She interpreted these events and understood their full meaning, in the splendor of the resurrection. The Magnificat is the fruit of the sapiential meditation of Mary. It is the hymn in which the Virgin, like the wise scribe, “pours forth words of wisdom and gives thanks to the Lord in prayer” (Sir 39,6). Mary is “daughter of Sion,” that is, representative of Israel.<sup>3</sup> In addition, she is the mother of Jesus and of all his disciples (Jn 19,25-27). Through her words, therefore, the Church of the covenant and of the new people of God breaks forth in a hymn of messianic joy. She interprets and situates the prodigy of the Incarnation within the arch of the whole history of salvation: from Israel to Christ, from Christ to the Church.

<sup>1</sup>A. Serra, *Sapienza e contemplazione di Maria secondo Lc 2,19.51b* (Roma: Edizioni Marianum, 1982), 195-258.

<sup>2</sup>About twenty early writers from both East and West consider the shepherds of Bethlehem (described in Lk 2,8-20) as a figure of the pastors of the Church. See my following studies: *Sapienza e contemplazione di Maria* . . . , pp.197-205; the entry *Bibbia*, in *Nuovo Dizionario di Mariologia* (Milano: Edizione Paoline, 1985), 252-57; and especially the article “I pastori al presepio. Riflessioni su Lc 2,8-20 alla luce dell’antica tradizione giudaico-cristiana,” in the collection *Nato da donna* . . . (*Gal 4,4*). *Ricerche bibliche su Maria di Nazaret (1989-1992)* (Milano-Roma: Edizioni Cens-Marianum, 1992), 7-95 (a summary form appears in *Ricerche storico-bibliche* 4 [1992]:109-132).

<sup>3</sup>Cf. Lk 1,26-38 with Zech 2,14-15; 9,9-10; Zeph 3,14-18; Jl 2,21-27.

Two major themes of the Magnificat will be considered: "poverty of spirit" (Lk 1,48a) and the "great deeds" performed by God. (Lk 1,49a). These themes originated in the Old Testament and are developed in the New Testament. Both themes are applicable to Israel, Christ, Mary, and the Church. My hope is that the ecclesial dimension of the Magnificat will become apparent. In the second century, St. Ireneus of Lyons wrote that in that hymn "Mary prophesies for the Church."<sup>4</sup> She is spokesman for Israel her people, but she also anticipates the experience that will be that of the Church.

The Church understands well the importance of this hymn. Every day, at Morning Prayer in the Eastern church and at Evening Prayer in the Western church, the Magnificat is part of its prayer. "The Church, which from the beginning has modeled her earthly journey on that of the Mother of God, constantly repeats after her the words of the Magnificat. From the depths of the Virgin's faith at the Annunciation and the Visitation, the Church derives the truth about the God of the Covenant" (*Redemptoris Mater*, 37). At Assisi, on October 27, 1986, when representatives of the world's religions gathered to pray for peace, the Christian churches, after praying the "Our Father," unanimously proclaimed the Canticle of Mary. The act was a confirmation that the Church "in Mary . . . joyfully contemplates, as in a faultless model, that which she herself wholly desires and hopes to be" (*Sacrosanctum Concilium*, 103).

### **I. The Poor in Spirit**

We shall reflect upon the texts of Luke 1,48a ("... because he has looked upon his lowly handmaid") and Luke 1,52 ("He has pulled down princes from their thrones and exalted the lowly"). Two questions present themselves: What does Mary mean when she identifies herself as "lowly" (poor), and who are the "lowly" (poor) whom God exalts?

There will be three sections in the first part of this reply. The first section will study the concept of poverty in the later writings of the Old Testament, those written from the middle of the

<sup>4</sup>*Adversus Haereses* III, 10.2 (PG 7,873: SC 211, pp.118-119).

second century to the middle of the first century before Christ; the second part will trace the concept in the Book of Judith, and the third part will study Luke 1,48a and Luke 1,52 in light of the conclusions drawn from these later books of the Old Testament. In that way, we will see how the Lucan texts are enriched by a new understanding which speaks to every Christian community wishing to live responsibly the challenge of the Gospel.<sup>5</sup>

### ***A. Poverty in the Later Writings of the Old Testament***

Our study will trace the concept of "poverty" as outlined in the last books of the Old Testament—First and Second Book of Maccabees, Judith, Esther, and Daniel. These books were written toward the middle of the second century B.C., during the period of the persecution of Antiochus IV Epiphanes and the insurrection of the Maccabees. In addition, consideration will be given the Book of Wisdom, written towards the middle of the first century B.C.

To these canonical documents, we shall add references to the extra-biblical Jewish literature which was a commentary on the canonical writings. Here are included the writings of the community of Qumran (middle of the second century B.C. to the first century after Christ), the "Biblical Antiquities" of Pseudo-Philo (second half of the first century after Christ), the "Jewish Antiquities" of Josephus Flavius (end of the first century after Christ), and the Targum, that is, the Aramaic version of the biblical texts, prepared for liturgical use in the synagogue, probably already in the prechristian period. Every detail cannot be considered. A synthesis of the elements common to these biblical and Jewish texts will be presented, insofar as they pertain to the theme of "poverty" and "the poor." More attention will be devoted to the Book of Judith, since it is truly a compendium of biblical theology on the concept of "poverty."

<sup>5</sup>More complete references can be found on Lk 1,48a and 1,52 in my article "Maria, 'profondamente permeata dello spirito dei "poveri di Jahvè"' (RM, 37)," in *Marianum* 50 (1988):193-289, which, with some changes, appeared in my collection *E c'era la Madre di Gesù (Gv 2,1). Saggi di esegesi biblico-mariana (1978-1988)* (Milano-Roma: Edizioni Cens-Marianum, 1989), 93-187. Here, the material is condensed with some necessary adaptations.

For our purposes, an examination of poverty of spirit in the sources mentioned above can be summarized under three principal headings: liberation from enemies; faithfulness to the Law of the Lord as an essential condition to obtain the liberation from enemies; and, prayer as the privileged expression of the "poor in spirit."

### *1. Liberation from Enemies*

All the above-mentioned works were written during a period in which the Israelite people was oppressed by foreign powers: first, by the Greeks, especially in the terrible persecution unleashed by Antiochus IV Epiphanes (years 167-164 B.C.), and then by the Romans, whose occupation began by Pompey in the year 63 B.C. The enemies who had settled in Palestine and oppressed the people were called: "proud" (arrogant/insolent),<sup>6</sup> "impious" (godless/infidels/evil-doers),<sup>7</sup> "sons of darkness."<sup>8</sup>

### *2. Faithfulness to the Law of the Lord*

Oppressed by slavery, Israel turned to the God of the Covenant to obtain freedom. Instructed in the tradition of the prophets and the wise ones of the Old Testament, the Jewish community, in the first and second centuries B.C., gradually arrived at an understanding that a prior and indispensable requirement for freedom from foreign oppression was faithfulness to the Law of the Lord, which is the Law of Moses, the Law of the Covenant. The recommendation made by Mattathias to his sons as he was about to die is significant: "My children, be courageous and grow strong in the law, for by it you will gain honor" (1 Mac 2,64).

This faithfulness to the law, it should be noted, is conceived as "poverty" or "poverty of spirit." The individual puts aside his/her way of judging, his/her own security, in order to vest

<sup>6</sup>1 Mac 1,24; 2 Mac 1,28; Jud 6,19; 9,9; Esther 1,1k; 4,17d; Dan 4,34.

<sup>7</sup>1 Mac 3,8; 2 Mac 1,17; 4,38; 6,13; Wis 10,20; 11,9; 16,16.18; 19,1. (This passage from the Book of Wisdom, describing the Egyptians who oppressed the Israelites, became the "prototype" for describing all those who oppressed and enslaved the people of Israel.)

<sup>8</sup>*Scritti della comunità di Qumràn*: 1QS (Regola della comunità) I,10; 1QM (Regola della guerra) I,1.

himself/herself with and embrace the ways of God. To designate this category of "the poor," the Hebrew words most frequently used are *anāw* (plural *anawîm*) and *anî*: terms whose root expresses the idea of "being curved, bent over." J. Dupont writes: "The image that defines them [the poor] is not that of the shrub that lies close to the soil, in opposition to the tree that rises very high in the sky; it is rather that of a flexible reed bent to the earth, bent under the wind without offering resistance."<sup>9</sup> In the post-exilic period, the poor person is not only the person who is in financial difficulties. He is, in a particular way, one who "humbles himself" before God, with the love and fear of a son, in total abandonment (as the "Moslem" in Islam).

The *anawîm* (the poor) are those who live according to all the prescriptions of the Law of Moses. It is there that God's plan is found, his great design; there stands the power and wisdom of Israel as the people of the Covenant. The *anawîm* are the pious, the just, the holy, the God-fearing, the faithful, those who take refuge in the Lord and observe his covenant and his commandments. The "poor in spirit" have the "soul" of the poor, and their whole being, their mode of living and of thinking, is oriented to God, to the Law of his Covenant.

The Israelites, obedient to the Torah—the Law of the Lord—and humbled by foreign powers, are called "righteous" (virtuous),<sup>10</sup> "saints,"<sup>11</sup> "saints of the Most High,"<sup>12</sup> "pious,"<sup>13</sup> "innocent,"<sup>14</sup> "blameless,"<sup>15</sup> "practicing the Law."<sup>16</sup> Among these titles, there appears at times that of the

<sup>9</sup>J. Dupont, "Les 'ptôchôî tô pnéumati' de Matthieu 5,3 et les 'anwé ruach' de Qum-rân," in *Neutestamentliche Aufsätze: Festschrift für Prof. Josef Schmid zum 70. Geburtstag*, ed. by J. Blinzler, O. Kuss, F. Mussner (Regensburg: Verlag F. Pustet, 1963), 63.

<sup>10</sup>Esther 1,1h; Wis 2,16; 3,1; 5,15 (these verses of Wisdom refer to those who are faithful to the law of the Lord and who, for that reason, endure insults); also, 10,20; 11,14; 16,17.23; 18,7.20; 19,16 (these verses refer to Hebrew slavery in Egypt).

<sup>11</sup>1 Mac 7,17 ("thy saints"); Wis 4,15 ("his elect . . . his holy ones"); 10,17; 18,5.9a.d.

<sup>12</sup>Dan 7,18.22.25.27.

<sup>13</sup>2 Mac 14,6 ("Those of the Jews who are called *Hasidaens*"; cf. 8,1: ". . . those who had continued in the Jewish faith"); J. Flavius, *The Jewish Antiquities* XII,7.1; *Targum Esther* 2,5.

<sup>14</sup>Flavius, *Jewish Antiquities*, II,15.5.

<sup>15</sup>Wis 10,5.

<sup>16</sup>1 Mac 1,67-68; 2 Mac 8,36 ff.

"poor."<sup>17</sup> This is especially true in the writings of Qumran, where the members of that community identify themselves as "the poor,"<sup>18</sup> "the assembly of the poor,"<sup>19</sup> "the people of the humble ones,"<sup>20</sup> "the people of benevolence,"<sup>21</sup> "the humble ones,"<sup>22</sup> "the humble ones of Judah."<sup>23</sup> Their submission to the will of God is qualified as "poverty (humility) of spirit."<sup>24</sup>

The concept of "poverty in the spirit" had influence on the attitude towards wealth. The "poor" person relied on the Lord, on his will, as expressed in the Mosaic Law. This law stamped as an intolerable scandal the unjust distribution of goods, and the lack of social balance that accompanies this maldistribution. We read in Deuteronomy (15, 4-5): "There will be no poor among you . . . , if only you will obey the voice of the Lord your God, being careful to do all this commandment which I command you this day." In the name of the God who had delivered Israel from the slavery of the Pharaoh, the Law of Moses provided ordinances for the assistance of the most wretched,<sup>25</sup> such as the remission of debt, the sabbatical year and the jubilee year<sup>26</sup>; and the prohibition of lending for high rates of interest within the community.<sup>27</sup>

The observance of the Law of the Lord (which entails "poverty") was therefore a guarantee of equality and awareness of one's dignity. After the Babylonian exile, the people complained because some of the community exacted high interest for loans. "Is not our flesh as the flesh of our brethren?

<sup>17</sup> Mac 14,14; Jud 6,19; 9,11; 13,20; 16,4.11.17; Esther 1,1k; Dan 3,37.39.87; Wis 2,10; *Targum gerosolimitano I*, Deut 7,7.

<sup>18</sup> 1QpAb (commentary on Prophet Habakkuk) XII,3.6.10; 1QM (Rule for the War) XIII,14; XVIII,8 ff.; 1QH (Inni) II,32; V,13 (cf. 1QM XVIII,8); 16.18 ff.

<sup>19</sup> 4QpPs37; II,9; III,10 ff.

<sup>20</sup> 1QH (Inni) V,22 ff.

<sup>21</sup> 1QH (Inni) V,23 ff.

<sup>22</sup> 11QPs<sup>a</sup> XVIII,17.

<sup>23</sup> 4QpIsa, fragments 8,9,10, line 3.

<sup>24</sup> 1QS (Rule of the Congregation) III,8; IV,3.

<sup>25</sup> Orphan and widow: Ex 22,21-23; Dt 10,18; 24,17-22; 27,19; slavery: Ex 21,1-11; Lv 25,39-46; Dt 15,12-18; Jer 34,8-22; stranger: Ex 22,20; 23,9; Lv 19,33; Dt 10,19; 24,14-15.17-22; 27,19.

<sup>26</sup> Ex 23,10-11; Lv 25,1-7; Dt 15,1-11.

<sup>27</sup> Ex 22.24; Lv 25,35-38; Dt 23,21.



Are not our children as their children?" (Neh 5, 5). Expressions of that kind indicate that the Covenant with the Lord acted as a ferment in their consciousness. God wished to make of his people, not a strange mixture of barons and vassals, but a community which cared for its members. We are not far from the admonition of the Baptist: "He who has two coats, let him share with him who has none; and he who has food, let him do likewise" (Lk 3,11).

### *3. Prayer as the Privileged Expression of "Poverty in Spirit"*

Firm adherence to the Lord and the Law (which constitutes "poverty in spirit") was manifested in the kind of ardent prayer which characterized the poor one. When the pious Israelite (that is, the one who was "poor in spirit") prayed to God, he expressed his gift of self to God, professed his total trust in communion with the Lord of the Covenant. The Israelite was never so "poor in spirit" as in prayer. Prayer became more intense during times of tribulation and anguish. When every possibility of escape from the enemy was excluded, the people, collectively and individually, invoked the Lord in prayer, knowing that with God nothing is impossible. In times of trial, Israel recalled what the Lord did during their flight from Egypt. At the Red Sea, there seemed no way of escape: the sea was in front of them and Pharaoh's army behind; and on both sides (adds the Jewish tradition) were snake-infested deserts.<sup>28</sup> Even in such a desperate situation, the Lord found a way, beyond human imagination. He made a path, where none seemed possible, through the sea. The remembrance of this liberation remained deeply impressed in the heart of succeeding generations of God's people. It was the first redemptive liberation, the archetype of what was to come.<sup>29</sup>

<sup>28</sup>Cf., for instance: *Targum Song* 1,9 and 2,14; *Mekiltà de-Rabbi Ishmael, Besbhalach* 3, related to Ex 14,13; *Ex Rabbah* 21,5 related to Ex 14,15; *Song Rabbah* 2,14.

<sup>29</sup>The scene of Israel at the Red Sea recurs frequently in the later books of the Old Testament, those which we are now examining. For example:

—the followers of Jonathan before the army of Bacchides (1 Mac 9,44-45: "Jonathan said to those with him: 'Let us rise up now and fight for our lives, for today things are not as they were before. For look! The battle is in front of us and behind us;

When pressed by similar hardships, the entire community and its individual members raised their prayer to the Lord. In the biblical literature of the first and second centuries B.C., there is a flowering of supplications, of prayers, dispersed throughout the stories of various events. These constitute a type of psalter—a second psalter.<sup>30</sup> For example, in the Old Testament we have:

- the two books of Maccabees (the many passages in which the people pray to the Lord when in danger or before a battle);
- the prayer of Judith (Jud 9,2-14);
- the prayers of Mordecai and of Esther (Esther 4,17 a-z);
- the prayer of Daniel (Dan 2,20-23);
- the prayer of the three young men in the furnace, Shadrach, Meshach and Abednego (Dan 3,24-90; cf. 1,7);
- the prayer of Susanna (Dan 13,42-43);
- the prayer of pseudo-Solomon (Wis 9).

the water of the Jordan is on this side and on that, with marsh and thicket; there is no place to turn'");

- the Israelites attacked by Holofernes (Jud 7,19-22);
- the Jews threatened by Haman (Esther 1h; 4,3.17 ly);
- the three young men in the furnace (Dan 3,19-23);
- Daniel in the lion pit (Dan 6,18);
- Susanna and the elders (Dan 13, 22).

The same type of imagery is found in the New Testament:

- the tomb of Jesus, closed with a large stone and guarded by soldiers (Mt 27, 60.64-66);
- the imprisonment of Peter, who was guarded by two soldiers inside the prison, while other guards kept watch at the main entrance to the prison (Acts 12, 4-6);
- the imprisonment of Paul and Silas in an inner chamber, while their feet were fastened in stocks (Acts 16,23-24).

<sup>30</sup>As can be noted in the Book of Psalms, and also in this type of prayer, it is not rare that the Israelites remembered the help which in the past the Lord had given them, when they fell into peril. The following are examples which recall such invocations: the revenge of Simeon on the Shechemites (Jud 9,2.4); Israel at the Red Sea (1 Mac 4,7-25; 9,25; 1QM [Writings of Qumrân, Rule of War], XI,9-10); David and Goliath (1 Mac 4,30; cf. *Targum Sal* 89,20; 1QM XI,1-2); David and the Philistines (1 Mac 4,30); the capture of Jericho (2 Mac 12,15; cf. 11,4; 15,11); the defeat of Sennacherib (1 Mac 7,41; 2 Mac 8,19; 15,22); the defeat of the Galatians in Babylon (2 Mac 8,20: an episode difficult to identify).

In the New Testament, we also have:

- the prayer of Jesus at the hour of his passion that the Father might free him (Mk 14,35-39; Mt 26,39-44; Lk 22,41-46. See also Jn 12,27-28; Hb 5,7);
- the prayer of the whole Church for the liberation of Peter (Acts 12,5);
- the prayer of Paul and Silas in the prison in Philippi (Acts 16,25).

In the biblical and the Jewish extra-biblical literature, when there are accounts of stories of salvation, special emphasis is given to prayer as the force of liberation. Frequently, a true and proper prayer is added, even when the biblical texts remain more generic.<sup>31</sup>

### ***B. Poverty of Spirit in the Book of Judith***

The elements listed so far find expression in the Book of Judith. Current opinion is that this book was composed during the era of persecution by Antiochus IV Epiphanes (167-164 B.C.). Therefore, Holofernes represents Antiochus the persecutor, "the haughty" leader of the "arrogant" Assyrians and of their allies (6,19; 9,9); Judith, on the contrary, represents the Jews threatened by Antiochus; they were "the poor" of the Lord (6,19; 13,20; 16,11).

The Hebrew name *Judith* signifies Judea (Jewess). The name was intentionally chosen by the author of this homonymous book. In the features of Judith are seen another "woman," the Judaic community of the time. The education of Judith, her words and her behavior, express the living spirituality, the aspirations, the ideals of the Jews living in Palestine in the middle of the second century B.C., in the climate of nationalistic and religious fervor provoked by the revolt of

<sup>31</sup>Sir 47,5 (cf. 1 Sam 17,45 in the Vulgate); *Liber Antiquitatum Biblicarum*, of Pseudo-Philo, 47,5; 1QGenAp (commentary of the Qumrān Genesis) XX,12-16; *Targum di Onkelos* Gen 48,22; *Targum gerosolimitano I* (that of pseudo-Gionata) and *II*, Ex 14,10; *Targum palestinese del codice Neophyti* (Biblioteca Vaticana), Ex 14,15; *Targum palestinese del codice Neophyti e Targum gerosolimitano II*, Ex 17,12; *Targum Song* 2,14; 6,1; 7,12.

the Maccabees.<sup>32</sup> The identification of Judith with "Judea" (the nation) is manifested above all in the final canticle, where Judith declares the bonds that tie her to her people: "My territory . . . my young men . . . my infants . . . my children . . . my virgins . . . my oppressed people . . . weak people . . . my people" (16,4.11.17). Judith, however, knows that she belongs to God, her Lord (16,1.12), since Israel is the people of the Covenant.

### *1. "Fidelity to the Law" and "Liberation"*

The spirituality of Judith is clearly that of the "poor in spirit." She has no more the consolation of a husband; she has a reverential fear of God (8,1-8). She is the "holy" woman (8,31), who is prompt in the observance of all the prescriptions of the Mosaic Law about legal purity concerning food and ablutions (8,6; 10,5; 12,2-4.7-9.19). She defines herself as a "religious" Israelite, who serves night and day the God of heaven (11,17). A profound conviction supports this woman, the daughter of Israel: The salvation of her people essentially depends on the absolute fidelity to the Law of the Lord. She herself reminds her fellow-citizens: "But we know no other God but him, and therefore we hope that he will not disdain us or any of our nation" (8,20; cf. 11,10 and 5,17-21).

In fact the liberation which Judith realizes for her people is a reward for her fervent and pure prayer. Uzziah, leader of the city of Bethulia, addresses her: "You . . . have avenged our ruin, walking in the straight path before our God" (13,20). The words of Uzziah sound in reality as a prophecy: If Israel, as personified in Judith, lives faithfully in the sight of the Lord God, then he will ransom it from the oppression of the enemies, of the "haughty."

In the Assyrian camp, Judith knew that her first weapon was prayer. She asked Holofernes that she might leave for prayer (12,6; cf. 13,3.10). Having risen then from the spring, "she prayed the Lord, the God of Israel, to direct her way for the raising up of her people" (12,8). The decisive moment is described with minute particulars, which contribute to producing a grand victory, obtained with most fragile means. The author notes

<sup>32</sup>Giuditta. Versione, introduzione e note di S. Virgulin (Roma, 1970), 7-27, especially 19: "... the work well fits into the period of the Maccabees."

that "no one, either small or great, was left in the bedchamber" of Holofernes (13,4). Similar to David in front of Goliath, Judith remained alone in the presence of Holofernes. Alone with her God, she said, "O Lord, God of all might, look in this hour upon the work of my hands for the exaltation of Jerusalem. . . . Give me strength this day, O Lord God of Israel" (13,4.7). The Jerusalem Bible comments: "Judith's triumph is the reward of prayer and exact observance of the rules of legal purity."<sup>33</sup>

## 2. *Prayer and Liberation*

Prayer is regularly associated with the events leading to liberation performed through the hand of Judith. There are eleven references to prayer. First, prayer gives relief to each Israelite (4,9), especially all who prostrate themselves before the Temple of Jerusalem, in communion with the priests officiating before the Lord (4,11-15). In her prayer, Judith exhorts the people to implore assistance from their God (8,17); the people entrust themselves to the intercession of the "holy" woman (8,31). She reveals her inner self to the Lord with the long prayer found in the ninth chapter, where the motives which animate the cry of the poor in spirit are summarized. Joined to the prayer of Judith are the cries and hopes of all the just of Israel, who confide solely in the Lord: "Your strength is not in numbers, nor does your power depend upon stalwart men; but you are the God of the lowly, the helper of the oppressed, the supporter of the weak, the protector of the forsaken, the savior of those without hope" (9,11).

## II. Luke 1,48-52 in Light of the Second and First Centuries B.C.

All recognize Luke's concern for the *anawim* of Israel, that is, for those "poor in spirit" who had been awaiting the

<sup>33</sup>*The New Jerusalem Bible* (London: Darton, Longman and Todd, 1985), 623. Josephus Flavius, in his speech to the citizens of Jerusalem, because of their surrender to the Romans, records several incidents in the history of Israel when the Israelites were victorious over their enemies, not because of their military superiority, but because of hands free of guilt raised in prayer towards the Temple and towards the Law (*Guerra Giudaica* V,9.4). See also *Ex Rabbab* 22,3, regarding 14,31, where prayer is welcomed if made with hands not guilty of violence (cf. Job 16,17), but not heard if made with hands stained with blood (cf. Is 1,15).

salvation to be brought by the Messiah. Now we are able to see how Luke received the tradition. Fidelity to the Law of the Lord and prayer are dispositions which make possible the freedom granted by the Lord.

Our study will have two parts: first, the spirituality of the "just" Israelites (those who longed to see the days of the Messiah); and, second, the figure of Mary, the "poor" woman, who prepared herself to welcome the gift of God, her "Savior."

### ***A. The Just Ones of Israel***

A strong pledge of fidelity to the Law of the Lord and a persevering prayer characterized the spirituality of the *anawim*.

#### ***1. Fidelity to the Law and Redemption of Israel***

Concern for the purity of Judaism, which arose at the time of the Maccabees, greatly influenced the contemporaries of John the Baptist and Jesus. The spiritual profile of the just one of Israel is found in Luke. Justice is derived from the observance of the Law of Moses.

Zachary and Elizabeth, the parents of John the Baptist, are designated as "righteous . . . before God, walking in all the commandments and ordinances of the Lord, blameless" (Lk 1,6); Simeon was "a man . . . righteous and devout," looking for the "consolation of Israel" (Lk 2,25); Anna, the prophetess, a widow from youth and already eighty-four years of age, never left the temple; she was "worshiping with fasting and prayer night and day," in fervent expectation of the redemption of Jerusalem (Lk 2,36-38; cf. Acts 26,6-7). John the Baptist was "righteous and holy" (cf. Mk 6,20), sent by God to make ready for the Lord a people prepared (Lk 1,17: cf. 1,77; 3,8). Joseph of Arimathea, member of the Sanhedrin, was a "good and righteous" person, who was looking for the Kingdom of God (Lk 23,50.51; cf. 19,11). Outside of Palestinian circles, Luke mentions the name of Ananias of Damascus, "a devout man according to the law, well seen by all the Jews who lived there" (Acts 22,12); and, among the sympathizers for Judaism, he remembers the Roman centurion Cornelius of Caesarea, "a devout man who feared God with all his household, gave alms liberally to the people . . ." (Acts 10,2). Finally, according to Matthew (1,19), there was also Joseph, husband of Mary, "a just man."

These persons, zealous and faithful to the Law, are aware that God works the "great things" which are part of Messianic redemption, if the people live "poverty in spirit." "You have comforted our poverty," said the people to Judith—"walking in the straight path before our God" (Jud 13,20b). Recall the Baptist's warning: "Bear fruits that befit repentance" (Lk 3,8). Before King Agrippa, Paul becomes a spokesman of Jewish hope, saying: "And now I stand here on trial for hope in the promise made by God to our fathers, to which our twelve tribes hope to attain, as they earnestly worship night and day" (Acts 26,6-7; cf. Lk 2,36-38).

## ***2. The Prayer of the Just for the Liberation of Israel***

The atmosphere in which Luke situates the "pious" of Israel who await the consolation of the Messiah is permeated by prayer. The Temple, as the holiest place of Jewish worship, occupies a very special place in Luke 1-2. Exegetes even speak of a "temple reverence" in Luke's Gospel.

Luke refers to the prayer and the praise of Zachary,<sup>34</sup> of Anna,<sup>35</sup> of the angels who appeared to the shepherds,<sup>36</sup> and that of the shepherds themselves.<sup>37</sup> Moreover, the prayer of Ananias<sup>38</sup> and that of the centurion Cornelius<sup>39</sup> are mentioned as happening outside of Jerusalem.

## ***B. Mary, the Poor Servant Saved by the Lord***

The Virgin Mary is presented by Luke as one of the *anawîm*. This image of Mary, sketched by Luke, is itself characterized by fidelity to the voice of the Lord and confident prayer.

<sup>34</sup>"Your prayer is heard, and your wife Elizabeth will bear you a son, and you shall call his name John" (Lk 1,13; cf. vv.24.57-58). Outside of the Temple, Zachariah delivers his prophetic hymn: "Blessed be the Lord God of Israel . . ." (Lk 1,67-79).

<sup>35</sup>"And coming up at that very hour she gave thanks to God . . ." (Lk 2,38).

<sup>36</sup>"And suddenly there was with the angel a multitude of the heavenly host praising God and saying: 'Glory to God in the highest, and on earth peace among men with whom he is pleased'" (Lk 2,13-14).

<sup>37</sup>"And the shepherds returned, glorifying and praising God for all they had heard and seen, as it had been told them" (Lk 2,20).

<sup>38</sup>"Now there was a disciple at Damascus named Ananias. The Lord said to him in a vision, 'Ananias.' And he said, 'Here I am, Lord'" (Acts 9,10 ss.).

<sup>39</sup>" . . . gave alms liberally to the people, and prayed constantly to God" (Acts 10,2). "Your prayers and your alms have ascended as a memorial before God" (Acts 10,4). See also the preceding note.

### 1. Mary's "Fidelity" to the Will of God

Mary's dialogue with the Angel Gabriel indicates a style of obedience and observance of God's law proper to the poor of Israel.

a. In the dialogue with God through the Angel Gabriel, the first word of Mary was not a "yes" but an objection: "How will this be done?" (Lk. 1,34). As Daughter of Israel, Mary learned to love her God "with all one's heart, with all one's soul and with all one's strength" (cf. Dt 6,5). The vivacity, the simplicity, of Mary's behavior toward the angel reflected the assembly of Jewish people and their dialogue with the mediators of the Covenant. Beginning at Sinai, God proposed but did not impose; in this way, he brought his people to obedience to his Word.<sup>40</sup>

The Christian tradition affirms that Mary was "poor" insofar as she filled generously the will of her God and Lord. Her "poverty" was her "fiat,"<sup>41</sup> which was never revoked.

b. The Law of Moses was the way by which Mary entered into contact with the will of God. Six times Luke notes that Mary and Joseph fulfilled their obligations to their child: "according to the Law of Moses . . . as it is written in the Law of the Lord . . . as it is prescribed in the Law of the Lord . . . they performed everything according to the Law of the Lord . . . according to the custom" (Lk 2,22.23.24.27.39.42). Like Zachary and Elizabeth, Mary and Joseph were "just before God, walking in all the commandments and ordinances of the Lord blameless" (cf. Lk 1,6). In a word, they had inherited the best of the *anawim* tradition.

<sup>40</sup>A. Serra, *Maria secondo il Vangelo* (Brescia: Queriniana, 1987), 7-17; idem, *Maria di Nazaret. Una fede in cammino* (Milano: Edizioni Paoline, 1993), 9-17.

<sup>41</sup>See, for instance: Origen (+253/254), *In Lucam* VIII,5-6 and *Fragment n.° 17* (SC 87, pp.168-171, 476-477); Ambrose (+397); Ambrose Autpertus (+784), *In Apocalypsin* II, regarding 2,9 (CCLM 27, I:116-117); *De Assumptione*, 10 (CCLM 27/B, pp.1033-1034); Bruno of Segni (+1123), *Commentaria in Lucam* I, 4 (PL 165,345); Rupert of Deutz (+1130), *In Canticum Canticorum* I, regarding 1,12 (CCLM 26, p. 30); John of Forda (+1214), *Sermo* 18,2 (CCLM 17, pp.165-166). I have examined these texts in my article "Maria, 'profondamente permeata dello spirito dei "poveri di Jahvé'" (RM 37)," in *Marianum* 50 (1988):279-285; also in my essays, *E c'era la Madre di Gesù . . .*, pp.178-185.



## *2. Mary, the Suppliant Who Obtains Salvation*

The Magnificat is a type of epiphany which reveals the prayer of Mary. It is a personal dialogue revealing her openness to God. The many references to the Old Testament in this composition demonstrate how the Virgin was educated in the faith of her ancestors, the faith of her people (cf. Lk 1,55a). From this faith, she was nourished in the hope of the redemption desired by every true Israelite. As a "daughter of Sion," she felt involved in the tension between the "poor" and the "proud."

Two categories of persons are mentioned in the Canticle of Mary. On one hand, there are the "proud," whom the Lord confounds in the thoughts of their hearts (Lk 1,51b); the "strong," whom he throws down from their thrones (Lk 1,52a); the "rich," whom he sends away empty-handed (Lk 1,53b). On the other side, there are the "poor," whom God exalts.

a. Who are these "poor ones"? They are the men and woman, previously mentioned, who fit the description given in Luke's Gospel. They are people faithful to the ways of the Lord as set out in the Law of Moses, and they are saturated with divine intimacy as a result of their prayer.

b. Who are the "arrogant," the so-called "mighty" and "rich"? Notice that the verbs used by Luke (concerning the God who exalts the poor and casts down the arrogant) are all in the aorist past tense. Luke is dealing with interventions that God has already made to confuse those opposed to him, because they have oppressed his "little ones," his "poor ones."

Who are the "proud (arrogant-powerful-rich)" persons? There are several possibilities. They could be those Israelites who, although members of the chosen people, were not living according to the Law of the Covenant. They could be those who, throughout Israel and Judah's history, preferred their own strength to that of God's (Goliath, Saul, Jeroboam, Achab, Jezebel, Manasseh, Holofernes, etc.). Or, they could also be the insecure groups who, as prisoners of a false security, were locked into their own financial well-being and lorded it over the poor. Or, perhaps, they were the forces of evil which came together to oppose Jesus and provoked his death (cf. Acts 4,25-28). Finally, they could possibly include among their

ranks the representatives of Roman power who ruled in Palestine with the support of local collaborators (Acts 4,27).

There is no agreement among exegetes. The answer varies, frequently dependent upon the opinion held on the historical and literary origins of the Magnificat. There are many questions related to the origins of the Magnificat. Was this canticle pronounced by Mary derived from the piety formed by the traditions of Israel? Or, does the Magnificat trace its origins to a prayer of thanksgiving made during a felicitous occasion (e.g., a military victory, possibly one during the time of the Maccabees) which was later placed on Mary's lips?

Was Luke's intention to relate Mary's praise to the Paschal Mystery, the supreme liberation which God in Christ made possible for his people? If this were the case, would it lead us to a Judeo-Christian community, one most likely dependent on Jerusalem as its "mother Church"?<sup>42</sup>

The hope of the "just" for the salvation of Israel was fed by fidelity to the Law of the Lord and by intense prayer. Mary shared this hope. She, in fact, celebrated God as "her Savior" (Lk 1,47). This attribute which Mary gave to her Lord allows us to understand that she, together with her brothers and sisters in faith, awaited "the redemption" of Israel. However, Mary was aware that God grants mercy to "those who fear him" (Lk 1,50), that is, to the "poor" who confide in him. The "poverty" of his servants is the fecund space where the Lord accomplishes his mighty works, his "great things." Mary's poverty of spirit was substantiated by a behavior completely in conformity with the Law of God and aided by fervent prayer.<sup>43</sup>

<sup>42</sup>A. Valentini, "Il canto della Chiesa in cammino," *Seminarium*, nuova serie 27 (1987):550-59, especially, pp.556-58. From the same author, see the fine monograph *Il Magnificat. Genere letterario. Struttura. Egesi* (Bologna: Edizioni Dehoniane, [1987]), 82-95 (a well-developed article on the *Sitz im Leben* of Mary's Cantic, with a good summary on p. 94). Valentini thinks that the canticle developed in a liturgical setting, in a Jewish community of Palestine. The original language had to be "a semitic one" (p. 95).

<sup>43</sup>J. Dupont writes, in his *Le tre Apocalissi Sinottiche* (Bologna: Edizioni Dehoniane, [1986]), 149: "... secondo Luca, questo modo di concepire l'attesa [della liberazione] come un atteggiamento attivo di preghiera caratterizzava già la religiosità del giudaismo. Egli la esprime magnificamente nell'ultimo grande discorso di Paolo rifer-

## C. *The Poverty of Christ and the Church*

### 1. *Jesus Christ*

Jesus well exemplifies "poverty in spirit" as unconditional abandonment to God. Having become son of man in his existence as Word incarnate, he remained "in the bosom of the Father" (Jn 1,18). In every deed of his earthly mission, Jesus registered that total immersion in the Father which he lived already from eternity, when "the Word was with God" (Jn 1,1). Jesus did nothing and said nothing that was not in perfect accord with the Father: "My food is to do the will of him who sent me and to accomplish his work" (Jn 4,34). He could, in all truth, say with the psalmist: "Lo, I have come to do thy will, O God . . . O my God, thy law is within my heart" (Ps 40, 8-9 commented on by Heb 10,5-10).

The plan of the Father was to make his Son like his brethren in everything except in sin (cf. Heb 2,17; 4,15). Christ was not compromised with sin, but he willed to share the sad consequences of sin. Therefore, writes Paul, though he was rich, yet for our sake, he became poor; so that by his poverty we might become rich (cf. 2 Cor 8,9). Jesus, in effect, in becoming man, laid aside the external splendors of the divine glory, and "emptied himself, and became obedient unto death, even death on a cross. Therefore God has highly exalted him" (Phil 2,6-9).

At his birth in Bethlehem he appeared as "a baby wrapped in swaddling clothes" (Lk 2,7.12). Later the people referred to him as the son of the carpenter (cf. Mt 13,55), and he was taken from this world like a common criminal (cf. Lk 22,37 which cites Is 53,12). Christ was "poor" since he was a "servant," and a "*suffering* servant," of the Father whose will he accepted with reverent submission (cf. Heb 5,7), resisting the suggestions of Satan. Instead of coming down from the cross and destroying his assassins, he died praying and pardoning, overcoming evil with good (cf. Rom 12,21); for thus willed his Father.

ito dagli Atti [= Atti 26,6-7] . . . L'attesa della realizzazione della promessa è vissuta in una preghiera, o in un culto, che si impone 'in ogni momento' (Lc 21,36), 'senza stancarsi' (Lc 18,1), che deve essere fatta 'con perseveranza' (Atti 26,7) e aver luogo 'notte e giorno' (Lc 2,37; Atti 26,7), 'giorno e notte' (Lc 18,7)."

In the Paschal mystery, Jesus is truly the "poor one." In that hour of darkness so dense, everything conspired against him: Pontius Pilate, Herod Antipas, the high priests, the elders, the heads of the people, the scribes and pharisees, the goaded and enraged mob, the soldiers, Judas, Peter and the disciples in flight. In whom could Christ confide? Only in the Father: "The hour is coming, indeed it has come, when you will be scattered, every man to his home, and will leave me alone; yet I am not alone, for the Father is with me" (Jn 16,32)—"When he was reviled, he did not revile in turn; when he suffered, he did not threaten; but he trusted to him who judges justly" (1 Pet 2,23). In truth, the Father showed the justice of the Son, not by un-nailing him from the cross, but by raising him to new life (cf. Acts 2,27.31; 3,14-15). He looked on the "poverty" of Jesus and thwarted the machinations of the powerful (cf. Acts 4,25-28). From that day, the way is marked for the Church and for humanity. God does not change his strategy. Jesus, made perfect in his human experience by his unfailing love for the Father and from the compassionate solidarity with his brethren, can say: "Come to me, all who labor and are heavy laden, and I will give you rest. Take my yoke upon you, and learn from me; for I am gentle and lowly in heart, and you will find rest for your souls" (Mt 11,28-29).

## *2. Church*

For the Church, "poverty in spirit" is fundamentally to accept without reserve Christ and his word. It is a dying to self that Christ may live in us: "Have this mind among yourselves, which was in Christ Jesus" (Phil 2,5). We could repeat with John the Baptist: "He must increase, but I must decrease" (Jn 3,30). In this spirit, the community of Jerusalem was molded the day after Pentecost. Its members "devoted themselves to the Apostles' teaching and fellowship, to the breaking of bread and the prayers" (Acts 2,42). From the frequent attention to the word of God transmitted in the apostolic catechesis, the Church understands that adhering to Christ and to his Gospel (which is "poverty of spirit") brings true communion which does not tolerate shameful social disproportions. And so "the company of those who believed were of one heart

and soul, and no one said that any of the things which he possessed was his own, but they had everything in common. . . . There was not a needy person among them, for as many as were possessors of lands or houses sold them and brought the proceeds of what was sold and laid it at the Apostles' feet; and distribution was made to each as had any need" (Acts 4,32.34-35; cf. 2,44-45). The wish expressed by Deuteronomy 15,4-5 was fulfilled: "There will be no poor among you . . . if only you will obey the voice of the Lord your God."

Today, "poverty in spirit"—intended as opening to Christ and to his Gospel—requires an effective commitment for social justice. Our common dignity as brothers and sisters in Christ is mortified by humiliating differences of categories. Our sinful situation, in which humanity struggles, shows how much the weight of unbridled selfishness of individuals and of groups slows down the journey of faith that animates justice. This is the reason for the urgency to "engage in politics," to translate, insofar as possible, the Christian message within the social structures. It is sad to hear that the Church has the words of liberation, but that other forces must bring about liberation.

The following passage of *Marialis Cultus* offers a fine description of Mary's poverty: "Mary of Nazareth, though completely abandoned to the will of the Lord, was not at all a woman passively submissive or of an alienating religiosity, but a woman who did not hesitate to proclaim that God is avenger of the lowly and the oppressed, and overthrows from their thrones the powerful of the world (cf. Lk 1,51-53) . . . Mary, who 'excels among the lowly and the poor of the Lord'<sup>44</sup> [was] a strong woman, who knew poverty and suffering, flight and exile (cf. Mt 2,13-23): situations that cannot escape the attention of those who wish to encourage with evangelical spirit the liberating energies of man and of society" (MC, 37). *Redemptoris Mater* (no.37) also identifies Mary as participating in the qualities of the poor. "Mary is totally dependent upon God and completely directed towards him, and, at the side of her Son, she is the most perfect image of freedom and of liberation of humanity and of the universe. It is to her as Mother

<sup>44</sup>*Lumen Gentium*, 55.

and Model that the Church must look in order to understand in its completeness the meaning of her own mission.”<sup>45</sup>

### **III. The “Great Deeds” of God**

The fourth verse of the Magnificat proclaims: “For he who is mighty has done *great things* for me, and holy is his name” (Lk 1,49). In these two phrases, three themes referring to God are found: great things, power, holiness. These ideas are connected and interdependent in the biblical tradition. We will examine them in a diachronical trajectory of Israel, Christ, Mary, and the Church.

#### **A. Israel and the “Great Deeds” of God**

The expression “great things” (“great deeds”) occurs frequently in the Old Testament, with special references to God as the author of the “great things.” There are also many passages where equivalent expressions occur.

- “marvelous things” (Ps 106,21b-22a);
- “terrible things” (Ps 106,21b-22b);
- “glorious things” (Deut 10,21 in the Septuagint; Ex 34,10; Job 5,9; 9,10);
- “good things” (Jer 40,3.9 in the Septuagint);
- “make your name great,” with someone, “make his throne great” (Gen 12,2; 1 Kings 1,37.47).

These references will help us understand and recognize the same terms which also appear in the New Testament, especially in the Magnificat.

#### **1. What Are the “Great Deeds” of God?**

They are the marvelous interventions of grace, manifested in the entire history of salvation in all times. Similar deeds show that God “exalts our days from birth, and deals with us according to his mercy” (Sir 50,22). At the head of all is the experience of the Egyptian exodus, recalled in Psalm 106,21-22: “. . . God, their Savior, who had done great things in Egypt, wondrous

<sup>45</sup>This passage is taken from the *Instruction on Christian Freedom and Liberation*, 97, published by the Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith (22 March 1986).

works in the land of Ham, and terrible things by the Red Sea." The first exodus from Egypt remains the "archetype," that is, the beginning and the exemplary model of the great deeds of God. Israel returns to its primitive experience when it invokes and obtains new acts of grace from its Lord: "As in the days when you came out of the land of Egypt I will show them marvelous things" (Mic 7,15). It happens in such a way that the second exodus (the Babylonian) and the third (that which Hebraism awaited from the Messiah) are celebrated as "great deeds."

At the liberation from Babylon (538 B.C.), the prophet Joel sings (2,21.26): "Fear not, o land: be glad and rejoice, for the Lord has done great things . . . , he has dealt wondrously with you." And Psalm 126,3 reads: "The Lord has done great things for us." The Messianic redemption is to be the epilogue of the great things that Israel awaits from its God. In the days near the time of the New Testament, it was longed for as the perfect and definitive reenactment of the Egyptian as well as the Babylonian exodus.

## 2) *What Is the Purpose of the "Great Deeds" of God?*

For whom does the Lord do great things? The answer is twofold: either for the entire people or for individual persons, to the advantage, however, of the entire community of Israel.

a. *The entire people*—The references include the Jewish community from the beginning to the present (e.g., Ps 106,21): "[Our fathers] forgot God, their Savior; who had done great things in Egypt, wondrous works in the land of Ham, and terrible things by the Red Sea." Also, Psalm 126,2.3: "Then they said among the nations: The Lord has done great things for them. The Lord has done great things for us; we are glad."

b. *Individual persons*—Here are found Abraham (Gen 12,2), Joseph (Gen 50,20), Moses (Deut 34,10-12 in the Septuagint; Sir 45,2), David (2 Sam 7, 21; 22, 51), Solomon (1 Kings 1,37.47), Jeremiah (Jer 33, 3), Esther (Esther 10, 3f), Judith (Jud 15, 8.10), Elizabeth, mother of the Baptist (Lk 1,58; cf.1,16-17.80). The examples indicate that when God does "great things," even to an individual person, he does it in view of the good that will derive to all the people or to the group which that person represents. For example, God promised Abraham, "I will make of you a great nation, and I will bless

you, and make your name great" (Gen 12,2). And through Esther, "the Lord has saved his people . . . , he has done great signs and wonders" (Esther 10,3f). Israel, therefore, should be called the place where God does great things, (later called "signs") of his "power" and "holiness." Because the great things of God are always for the benefit of all the chosen people, even if performed in favor of an individual person, they are "recalled" in meditation and "transmitted" in the announcement.

### *3) How Do the "Great Deeds" Contribute to the Holiness of the People?*

God's great deeds are intended for the holiness of the people. What is important is the moral, interior dimension of the great and stupendous deeds wrought by God. There is nothing "miraculous" in them; they are not ends in themselves; they are conceived in the service of persons, in fidelity to the covenant with the Lord. In biblical revelation, it is always the liberty of the person which is sought. Why, the author of Deuteronomy asks, were the people spectators of the wondrous interventions with which God delivered them from Egyptian slavery? The response is: "That you might know that the Lord is God; that there is no other besides him. . . . Therefore, you shall keep his statutes and his commandments. . . ." (Deut 4,35.40). And for what purpose—according to the prophets—does God commit himself to break the Babylonian yoke? So that Israel might experience a renewal of heart. The return to Israel will be a consequence and sign of the "return-conversion" to God. It is the moral transformation thus foretold through the mouth of Ezekiel: "A new heart I will give you, and a new spirit I will put within you; I will take out of your flesh the heart of stone and give you a heart of flesh. And I will put my spirit within you, and cause you to walk in my statutes and be careful to observe my ordinances" (Ezek 36,26-27; cf. Zeph 3,17: "He will renew you in his love").

### *4. The "Great Deeds" Reveal the Power and the Holiness of God.*

a. *The "power" of God*—Many times Scripture speaks of the omnipotence of God who intervenes "with powerful hand and



outstretched arm." But it is an omnipotence of a God who loves his creatures, for whom there is no obstacle that could block the inventiveness of his love. He is more powerful even than our limitations, the poverty of human resources, sickness, sterility, death, sins of every kind. Through the great things that he does for us, he shows the strength of the love that overwhelms everything: "Powerful waters cannot extinguish love, nor rivers sweep it away" (Song 8,7).

The reason for the Exodus from Egypt (Deut 4,37) was "Because [the Lord] loved your fathers and chose their descendants after them, and brought you out of Egypt . . . by his great power" (cf. Ex 15,12-13). Announcing the end of the Babylonian slavery, the Lord proclaimed: "I will open rivers on the bare heights and fountains in the midst of the valleys; I will make the wilderness a pool of water, and the dry land springs of water . . . that men may see and know . . . that the hand of the Lord has done this" (Is 41,18.20). At the rebirth of Israel in the Hellenic period, Sirach prayed: "Lift up thy hand against foreign nations and let them see thy might. . . . Show signs anew, and work further wonders" (Sir 36,2.5).

b. *The "holiness" of God*—In Hebrew the word *gâdôsh* (holy) is derived from a root which means "to cut, to separate." In force of the original etymology, the term orients above all towards the idea of separation, distinction. To affirm that God is holy, is the same as to say he is separated, distinct from creatures (cf. the Greek *hagios* = without earth). He is the inaccessible, the completely different, the transcendent, to whom nothing can be compared: "To whom then will you compare me, that I should be like him? says the Holy One" (Is 40,25). Now, God shows his holiness, "makes holy his name," by working "great things" which he alone can do and the defenseless idols of the pagan nations cannot: "Who is like thee, O Lord, among the gods? Who is like thee, majestic in holiness, terrible in glorious deeds, doing wonders?" (Ex 15,11; cf. Num 20,13; 1 Sam 2,2; Is 41,14-20; 43,3; Ezek 28,22-25; 36,23-24).

### ***B. Christ and the "Great Deeds" of God***

The "great things" that God did in the Old Testament reach their climax in the salvific ministry of Jesus.

1. Luke writes that "all the people rejoiced at all the glorious things that were done by him" (Lk 13,17). These "glorious things" are synonymous with "great things," and refer to the various wonders the Lord was working in order to relieve the oppressed in body and in spirit.

2. Miracles, even if worked by Jesus for single individuals (e.g., Lazarus), had a public, social purpose. They were meant to stimulate the people of Israel to faith in Jesus as the Messiah. Therefore, they have as audience "the multitude" (Lk 13,17; cf. 5,26; 19,37). They were, in effect, the tangible proof that God had visited "his people" (Lk 7,16; cf. 24,19).

In the person of the Son, the New Israel, the Father's wondrous interventions occur: "For the people standing by me," says Jesus, "that they may believe that thou didst send me" (Jn 11,42). In the discourse of Pentecost, Peter will say: "Jesus of Nazareth, a man attested to you by God with mighty works and wonders and signs which God did through him in your midst, as you yourselves know" (Acts 2,22).

3. Jesus, however, is not a magician who deceives the people. Like the "great deeds" of God in the Old Testament, so also the "glorious deeds" worked by Jesus tend to remake persons from within, influencing them to welcome the salvation that comes from adhering to Christ the Messiah. In practice, these "glorious things" are the result of the faith of the person and of the power of Jesus: "Your faith has saved you," declares Jesus to the woman who had been a sinner (Lk 7,50), to the one suffering from a hemorrhage (Lk 8,48), to the Samaritan leper (Lk 17,19), and to the blind man of Jericho (Lk 18,42). Faith is the prerequisite for the gift of salvation (Lk 8,50). It permits Jesus to go about "doing good and healing all that were oppressed by the devil" (Acts 10,38b).

4. The wondrous interventions of Jesus manifest the "power" of God working in him, and the "holiness" (or the "divinity") of his Person.

a. "And the power of the Lord was with him to heal" (Lk 5,17). This "power of the Lord" is the Holy Spirit operative in Jesus (Lk 4,14.18). At various times, Luke presented the Holy Spirit as "energy," as "power" (Lk 1,35; 4,14; Acts 1,8; 10,38). This showed that God was with Jesus (Acts 10,38). Just as oil strengthens the human body, so the Father strengthened the

humanity of the Son with the mystery-filled anointing of the Spirit (cf. Acts 10,38a).

b. The "signs" the Father worked in Jesus revealed to the world that Jesus is equal to the Father in his divinity (Jn 8,28). He is the Holy One of God (Jn 6,69), the Lord-God of the New Covenant (Jn 20,28). The multitude of the redeemed, who participated in the same victory of Christ at his death, proclaim "Great and wonderful are thy deeds, O Lord God the Almighty . . . thou alone art holy. All nations shall come and worship thee" (Rev 15,3.4).

### ***C. Mary and the "Great Deeds" of God***

We now return to Luke 1,49 and continue the commentary.

1. The prodigy of the virginal conception of the Word is the center of the "great deeds" worked by God in Mary. It provides the immediate context in which Luke placed the Magnificat. The Virgin, in fact, breaks forth with her hymn in response to the greeting of Elizabeth: "Blessed are you among women, and blessed is the fruit of your womb. . . . And blessed is she who believed that there would be a fulfillment of what was spoken to her from the Lord" (Lk 1,42-45).

2. Though accomplished in Mary, that event has an ecclesial importance. Within the Magnificat there is a relationship between the Virgin and the community of which she forms part. Looking upon the "poverty" of Mary, God exalts "the poor" (vv. 48a.52b). Casting his gaze on this "his handmaid," he redeems "Israel, his servant" (vv. 48a.54a), Mary is conscious that the great deeds lavished upon her by the Almighty fulfill the promises made "to our Fathers, to Abraham and to his posterity" (vv. 49a.55).

3. Also for Mary, the "great deeds" with which she was favored in the conception of the Son of God involve sanctifying effects for her person. By the power of the Spirit, God creates the humanity of the Word in the womb of the Virgin, and, in addition, he prepares the mind and the heart of the girl of Nazareth to consent to the plan of the incarnation "with all her heart, with all her soul, and with all her might" (cf. Deut 6,5). The divine initiative, so ineffable, accompanies the faith of Mary, which is the response of her committed freedom: "Blessed is she who believed that there would be a

fulfillment of what was spoken to her from the Lord," exclaims Elizabeth (Lk 1,45).

In the first covenant at Sinai, the people, when asked by God through Moses, responded "All that the Lord has spoken we will do" (Ex 19,3-8; cf. 24,3.7). At the dawning of the new covenant, the time of the Annunciation, Mary, asked by an angel, pronounced her "fiat" (Lk 1,2b-38). That "yes" knew no deviations. As "handmaid" of the Son, her Lord, Mary manifested a faith which was enduring and full of wonder. At the foot of the cross, above all, she manifested a beauty that comes from within. We should not overlook this most human element of the great deeds worked in her by the Almighty.

4. The "marvelous deeds" worked in the Holy Virgin give witness to the "power" and "holiness" of God.

a. The "power" of the Almighty—which is the Holy Spirit (cf. Lk 1,35)—is at work in the conception of the Word, without human concurrence: "Nothing is impossible with God" (Lk 1,37). Mary is surrounded by the power of the Spirit, and she will remain the Spirit's dwelling place. The divine power of the Spirit will not cease to do great deeds to make this specially chosen creature a mother worthy of the divine Word, generous collaborator and true disciple of the Son, from the Annunciation (Lk 1,31) to Pentecost (Acts 1,14; 2,1-4). The Spirit will suggest to believers two other "great deeds" regarding the person of the Virgin—one dealing with her beginning in her mother's womb (the Immaculate Conception) and the other with her departure from this world (the Assumption).

b. Since only God is able to do these deeds, he reveals himself as "the Holy One," that is, the only Lord. The virginal conception of Christ, the unique wonder in human history in the absolute sense, signifies the singular uniqueness of that unborn child: "He is holy, Son of God" (Lk 1,35), in a very special title.

It should be said that from the "beginning" of his "great deeds," God continues to be himself, affixing the seal of his divine Omnipotence. He creates the world "from nothing" (2 Mac 7,28); from a "non-people," which was Israel in Egypt (cf. Hos 1,8; 2,25; Ezek 16,4-5), he forms a people (Is 43,1). From the womb of a virgin (cf. Lk 1,34-35), he gives life to the

humanity of the Word. From a tomb closed with a large rock and well guarded, he makes his Son rise, "first fruit" of the renewed world. From God is a love that does not know barriers, not even those interposed by human selfishness or impotence: this is the specific power of God! He alone is able to love to that point. And so he is revealed as "holy," that is, the only true God.

#### ***D. The Church and the "Great Things" of God***

In the New Testament, we never find a phrase declaring that God has done great deeds for his Church. There are, however, passages where this same concept is formulated with equivalent terms, which echo the Old Testament tradition. Remembering the Old Testament antecedents, it will not be difficult for us to discover in what way the Risen Savior continues to do "great deeds" in his Church.

1. There are, above all, the "miracles" that accompany the evangelical preaching (cf. Mk 16,17-18). Copious testimonies are found in the Acts of the Apostles about the transmission of the healing power of Jesus to the apostles and the disciples (Acts 3,6.12.16; 4,30; 5,12; 6,8; 8,13; cf. Heb 2,3-4). These wonders, writes Paul, caused the Gospel to be welcomed "not as the word of men, but, as it truly is, the word of God" (1 Thess 2,13).

2. The miracles of Jesus (cf. Lk 13,17) and the great deeds of the Old Testament which are recorded in the Acts of the Apostles have a communitarian purpose of providing public evidence. By the hands of the Apostles, "many miracles and wonders among the people" were done, so that the people extolled the new community of believers (Acts 5,12-13). And Stephen, "full of grace and power, did great wonders and signs among the people" (Acts 6,8). The "signs" are offered to "everyone," so that to everyone there is addressed the call to faith (Mt 28,19; Acts 1,8).

3. The life of faith, with the transformation that it initiates, is the summit of the "great deeds" that Christ does for the Church. If the wonders worked by Jesus were done because of faith, the same can be said of those that happened through the Apostles and the disciples associated with them. Through those signs, the Lord "bore witness to the word of his grace"

(Acts 14,3). After having made the cripple walk, Peter testified that "the faith which is through Jesus has given the man this perfect health in the presence of you all" (Acts 3,16). At Joppa, where the Apostle had raised Tabitha, "many believed in the Lord" (Acts 9,42). At Paphos, the execration of Saul provoked the temporary blinding of the magician Elymas, causing the proconsul Sergius Paulus to believe, "for he was astonished at the teaching of the Lord" (Acts 13,12). And at Lystra, Paul healed one of his hearers, a paralytic "who had faith to be made well" (Acts 14,9). Faith—confirmed John—is truly "the work of God," fruit both of divine initiative and of human response: "They said to him: 'What must we do to be doing the works of God?' Jesus answered them: 'This is the work of God, that you believe in him whom he has sent'" (Jn 6,28-29). These are "the greater works" that the Father would show to Jesus (Jn 5,20) through the evangelization of the disciples (Jn 14,12): that is, to give eternal life to whoever hears his word (Jn 5,24), obeying the impulse of the Spirit (Jn 4,23-24; 14,16-17.26; 16,7-15). Eternal life, declared John (17,3), begins from the moment in which one recognizes the Father as the one true God and Jesus Christ as the one sent by him. It is the experience of faith from its very beginnings. The passage from death to life marks the full development (Jn 5,24-29). Here is the summit of the great deeds that the Father, the Son and the Spirit go about awakening in the world, renewed by the resurrection of Christ.

4. Finally, in the Christian life according to the Spirit, there shines forth the "power" of the risen Christ and his holiness is manifested, that is, his divinity.

a. The "power" of Christ, raised to the right hand of the Father, is communicated through the Spirit (Lk 24,49; Acts 1,8; 2,33). It is the root of the wonderful signs that gave credit to the proclamation of the Gospel at Jerusalem (Acts 3,12.16; 6,8), at Thessalonica (1 Thess 1,5), at Corinth (1 Cor 2, 4): Faith did not rest "in the wisdom of men but on the power of God" (1 Cor 2,5). In the faith and charity of the Ephesians, Paul recognized (with prayerful gratitude) the effects of the extraordinary power of the Father: The power which the Father manifested by raising Jesus from the dead now is communicated to believers (Eph 1,15-20; cf. Phil 3,21).

b. A consequence of the "power" of Christ communicated to believers (cf. Jn 17,2) is the ability to recognize the true visage of Christ as "the only Holy One" (Rev 15,4), "the Holy one of God" (Jn 6,69).

The glory of the Son of God is rendered visible in the disciples by the love they are capable of expressing: "I am glorified in them" (Jn 17,10); "By this my Father is glorified, that you bear much fruit, and so prove to be my disciples" (Jn 15,8). The vocation of the Church is to reflect the divine radiance of Christ! "I am the light of the world" (Jn 9,5). "You are the light of the world" (Mt 5,14).

### **Conclusion**

Where are the "great deeds" of God today? Our contemporaries speak much of the absence of God. With Blaise Pascal, we should remember that our God is "the God of Abraham, of Isaac and of Jacob, not of the philosophers and the scholars" (*Memoriale* of 1654). He makes himself known by working "great deeds" in the history of salvation. And this same power continues today in the Church.

We want, like the Apostle Thomas, to touch Christ with our hand. We do so by remembering the "marvelous works" that his Spirit causes in the Church, in the world. They are innumerable: the dedication of those who do good without any acknowledgment or recognition; the heroism of the martyrs of every faith; the witness of celibacy for the kingdom of heaven; the defeat of selfishness in the progress toward freedom; the desire for authenticity inborn in the ardor of the new generations; the desire for renewal that pervades the churches of Christ. Let us begin from here, and then we ask: Why all this? It is the love present in the world that returns us to the existence of Christ who is Love. Exactly as Jesus prayed, "Father . . . that they may all be one in us, so that the world may believe that thou hast sent me" (cf. Jn 17,21).

When the "great deeds" of love flourish, then we realize that Christ is present, that the "power" of his Spirit gives true life to the world, and that only "the Holy One, the Lord, the Most High," the One who alone is holy, can save us (cf. Acts 4,12). So the Magnificat focuses our attention on God, while our feet remain firmly planted on the ground!