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## HOW CAN SPIRITUALITY BE MARIAN?

Johann G. Roten, S.M.\*

"There is nothing better than true devotion to Mary, conceived as an ever more complete following of her example, to introduce one to the joy of believing."<sup>1</sup> Can this statement, formulated with the spiritual formation of future priests in mind, be applied to all Christians? Is it true that sound Marian devotion is "an essential aspect of Christian spirituality"?<sup>2</sup> Or must we concede that Marina Warner's prophecy has come true, namely, that the "reality of her [ Mary's] myth is over; the moral code she affirms has been exhausted"?<sup>3</sup> While reducing Marian devotion to an expression of the "traditionalist counter-movement," a recent sociological study reached a different conclusion: "With the weight of the history I reviewed . . . firmly supporting the following conclusion, I contend that Marian devotion will continue well into the next millennium."<sup>4</sup>

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<sup>1</sup>Congregation for Catholic Education, "Circular Letter concerning Some of the More Urgent Aspects of Spiritual Formation in Seminaries" (Rome, 1980), part II, section 4.

<sup>2</sup>Congregation for Catholic Education, "The Virgin Mary in Intellectual and Spiritual Formation: Letter from the Congregation for Catholic Education, March 25, 1988 ([Dayton, Ohio]: The Mariological Society of America, 1999), no. 36.

<sup>3</sup>M. Warner, *Alone of All Her Sex: The Myth and the Cult of the Virgin Mary* (London: Weidenfeld and Nicolson, 1976), 338.

<sup>4</sup>Jonathon L. Wiggins, "Marian Devotion in the U.S. Catholic Church as a Part of the Traditionalist Countermovement" (Ph.D. dissertation; Chicago: Loyola University, 2000), 185-186.

Sociological projections notwithstanding, Marian devotion and spirituality will be with us as long as there exists faith in Christ and his Gospel. Recognizing Christ as the central figure of the Gospel, we will be able to discover in Mary the first Christian, first in time and first as to the quality of her faith. "We need not imagine where Mary is . . . she is at the heart of the Gospel."<sup>5</sup> Mary is an integral part of Christianity's genetic code, and thus intimately related to the various expressions of its life in past, present and, so we hope, future. The question here is: How does Mary relate to mainstream Christianity? Can one be Christian without being Marian? Is it legitimate to speak about Christian spirituality without making reference to Mary? Or, in different perspective: How can spirituality be Marian? Last but not least, is there a form of "Marian spirituality" which, in fact, is neither truly Marian nor truly Christian?

## I. ASPECTS OF CONTEMPORARY SPIRITUALITY

- A. Spirituality—A Proliferation Term
- B. Claiming Wholeness and Experience
- C. The Quest for the Self
- D. Self-direction vs. Creation-centeredness

### A. Spirituality—A "Proliferation Term"

The main focus of this study being "Marian spirituality," our first and immediate concern is with the meaning of spirituality itself, Christian spirituality in particular. According to certain authors, *spirituality* has advanced—or degenerated—to the status of a proliferation term, one highly fashionable but ambivalent about its exact definition and which suggests a cluster where almost anything goes: stoic attitudes, yoga discipline, interior journeys, channeling, the cult of stigmata, art appreciation, desert experience, intensive journals, and, as William Stringfellow concludes, "these

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<sup>5</sup>Jean-Pierre Prévost, *Mother of Jesus* (Ottawa: Novalis, 1988), 21.

and many other things, [such as] squatting on top of a pillar."<sup>6</sup> The range of contemporary spirituality, its related movements and contents, is enormous. It reaches from constituted or labeled movements, such as those recently covered by the term "New Age," to specific techniques like "I Ching" and various life-styles and focused behavioral patterns (e.g., ecology-oriented ways of conducting one's existence). Few of these expressions of spirituality present a typically Christian character.

### B. Claiming Wholeness and Experience

This all-pervasive and multi-faceted movement seems to present at least two strongly marked features:

1. It advocates unity and wholeness on all levels of human life, and tends to reject whatever separates body and soul, people and their fellow human beings, humans and their physical and "spiritual" environment. Particularization and isolation generate dualisms, something authentic spirituality has to avoid or overcome by all means: "A living spirituality, one built on experience, power, and cosmology, would never acquiesce to even the naming of such a dualism."<sup>7</sup> Sexual liberation and its attempt to overcome the opposition between body and soul is only one example in the postmodern holy war against dualism. There are other stages in the evolution toward a holographic world view or spirituality, such as the majority-centered new morality orchestrated by the social sciences,<sup>8</sup> the conquest of cyberspace and the construction of a super-highway of information, and, not least, the

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<sup>6</sup>William Stringfellow, *The Politics of Spirituality* (Philadelphia: Westminster Press, 1984), 19.

<sup>7</sup>M. Fox, "A Mystical Cosmology: Toward a Postmodern Spirituality," in *Sacred Interconnections: Postmodern Spirituality, Political Economy, and Art*, ed. by D. R. Griffin (Albany: State University of New York, 1990), 18.

<sup>8</sup>M. Ferguson, *The Aquarian Conspiracy: Personal and Social Transformation in the 1980s* (Los Angeles: J. P. Tarcher, 1980).

discovery and promotion of globalization of the social and cultural world based on global economics.

Inspired by Eastern mysticism, spirituality is viewed by some as evolving similarly to nuclear physics. Whereas the history of physics moves from the study of corpuscular quantitiveness to the discovery of the energetical structure of reality, the spiritual life develops from the dichotomy of the personal level of consciousness to trans-personal awareness and consciousness of unity and totality. The latter merges with the soul of humanity and thus achieves a quasi-divine status.<sup>9</sup> Once a characteristic trait of the many "New Age" splinter groups, it has reached the grass roots level of collective consciousness. Its origin can be found in F. Capra's "The Turning Point" (1982) and St. Groff's "The Adventure of Self-Discovery" (1988). In similar fashion, the dualism between the natural and the supernatural is overcome by pantheism or panentheism, a proclaiming that all things are in God and God in all things—garnering a multitude of expressions, from Mechtild of Magdeburg's mysticism to the hugging of trees, endowed with spiritual and transcendent qualities.

2. The second major characteristic of this age of spirituality can be summarized in the word "experience." Spiritual activities are designed to quell the deep cravings for emotional density and to lead the individual through personal involvement to radical inner experience of self and all else. The road of experience is patterned with a series of well-known imperatives. Its goal being wisdom rather than knowledge, spirituality stresses the importance of right brain over left brain, mystical over rational activity, and feminist over patriarchal sensitivity. Spiritual experience is mainly directed toward self, bodiliness and nature, and it attempts to capture the innermost reality of being human, which frequently happens to also be the principle of the universe. Whenever God is an object of spiritual activity, He/She/It is relocated in the sphere of

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<sup>9</sup>This train of thought is multifaceted and can be found in many techniques of psychohygiene and wellness training.

the experiential, becoming the object of the human quest for meaning, which involves all our senses and our striving for a permanent experience of the presence of God in a so-called mystical continuum. It is in the nature of experience to have recourse to experimenting with the various sources and possibilities of spiritual experience. While sampling and testing these, persons engaged in such experimentation never lose sight of its ultimate objective, which is to reach a new and more permanent peak of spiritual experience.

Spirituality based on the quest for personal (and sometimes collective) experience puts at its center the sensing and experimenting subject. Spirituality is *for* the individual; sometimes, even the spiritual experience of God, through nature and in community, is ultimately directed toward the satisfaction of the individual. This leads to the observation that experiential spirituality frequently bears traits with hedonistic tendencies. The pursuit of experience coincides with the pursuit of spiritual satisfaction and fulfillment, and it frequently reflects the hedonism of consumerism with its quest for immediate and total satisfaction. The common denominator of this trend can be found in Thomas Stratman's assertion: "There is no spiritual experience in this life that is not bodily and sensate. We are each a body-soul, a psychosomatic unity."<sup>10</sup>

### C. The Quest for the Self

Wholeness and experience are among the key elements of the much-cited world-view of postmodernism, which remains a polymorphous cultural movement of many and sometimes contradictory facets. And so it comes as no surprise that the favorite allegory used by postmodernist writers is still Borges's famous fable of the Chinese encyclopedia, mentioned by Michel Foucault in

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<sup>10</sup>T. Stratman, "The Boy and the Hen: An Instance of Experiential Spirituality," *Spirituality Today* 33 (Sept. 1981): 210.

the introduction to *The Order of Things* (1966).<sup>11</sup> Whether postmodernist or not, wholeness and experience are deeply engrained in contemporary Christian and Catholic expressions of the spiritual life.

Prior to Vatican II, spirituality could easily be divided into spirituality for the laity and spirituality for religious. Lay spirituality was in fact mostly devotional, consisting in a variety of prayers to the saints based on instrumental (prayer of petition) and mechanistic (repetitive and quantitative prayer) principles. In comparison, the spiritualities of religious life tended to be highly specialized (for example, atonement spirituality), structured (spiritual accounting, timetables and formalized prayer), and somewhat esoteric (making it difficult to communicate to the uninitiated). Influenced by the three most important factors of ecclesial transformation stemming from Vatican II—the Bible, the liturgy and the world—the two currents blended into one broad general Christian spirituality, considered as a “common property” spirituality. Here are some of its distinctive features: It was a non-differentiated spirituality, in accord with the origins of Christianity, focused on essentials such as love of neighbor and love of God. Rejecting dogmatism, especially clerical and theological, it fostered rediscovery of the spiritual self and put forward the quest of self-actualization for people of all walks of life.

What emerged progressively from this amorphous movement was the spiritual self as evolving reality. Carried on and shaped by various trends in psychology (among them personality psychologies such as *ego*-psychology, personality typologies, developmental typologies and transpersonal psychology), the spiritually concerned person developed a positive and optimistic outlook on the self, mobilized creative power toward self-transformation, and saw in the quest

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<sup>11</sup>For specific information on postmodernism and spirituality, see Aldo N. Terrin, *La religiosità del postmoderno* (Bologna: ed. Dehoniane, 1992); J. Demetrio Jiménez Sanchez Mariscal, “Postmodernidad ¿Encanto desilusionado o ilusión del desencanto?,” *Religion y Cultura* 182 (1992): 367-388; *Divine Representations: Postmodernism and Spirituality*, ed. by Ann W. Astell (New York: Paulist Press, 1994).

for God a call to growth within oneself and through interaction with others. Self-discovery and individualization of the spiritual life prompted the understanding of spirituality as process, and of perfection as dynamic growth. Transpersonal psychology emphasized the experience of the self's depth, the experience of unity and harmony between the microcosm of the psyche and the macrocosm of nature.

However, self-centered spirituality is not limited to intimate dealings with radical inner experience and the exploration of the outer space of consciousness. Personalized spirituality does not shy away from doing battle on the social front. Inspired by the social gospel tradition and various social justice movements, contemporary social spirituality branches out into a number of specific orientations, such as liberation spirituality, ecological spirituality, the spirituality of empowerment, and mysticism in action. All are opposed to escapist religion, and are sustained by heightened political, moral and religious consciousness. They are steeped in the conviction that only accurate understanding of how society functions will, in turn, trigger critical awareness and openness to others and lead to practical commitment.<sup>12</sup>

#### D. Self-direction vs. Creation-centeredness

In the recent past of the spiritual history of the United States, there are two typical movements of spirituality which most accurately reflect the basic tendencies described here, namely, wholeness, experience and self-centeredness. One of these movements is Adrian van Kaam's Formative Spirituality or Spiritual Self-direction. Originating in the 1960s, it has developed over the following decades into an ever more complex and quasi-hermetic school of the spiritual life. Van Kaam's original vision is based on the three key notions of Self, Transcendence, and Spiritual Direction,

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<sup>12</sup>D. Dorr, *Spirituality and Justice* (Maryknoll, N.Y.: Orbis Books, 1984); W. Granberg-Michaelson, *A Worldly Spirituality: The Call to Redeem Life on Earth* (San Francisco: Harper and Row, 1984); Sandra M. Schneider, "Feminist Spirituality," in *The New Dictionary of Catholic Spirituality*, ed. by M. Downey (Collegeville, Minn.: The Liturgical Press, 1993), 394-405.



and operates on the basic assumptions that the core of the human person is his/her spirit, the primary force of our unfolding *spirituality*, with its goal of progressive spiritualization of the human being. Spiritualization entails personal surrender to the transcendent, and, in the light of the transcendent, the discovery and acceptance of one's unique spiritual life-direction. It is expected that this spiritual life-direction will progressively permeate and transform all vital aspects of our total self. This process is deeply Christo-centric, and the self achieves uniqueness in the "graced discovery, acceptance and incarnation of the presence of Christ in [our] life."<sup>13</sup> Jesus Christ is our unique spiritual direction: in and through him, the self will overcome "self-fascination" and reach a state of "social participation" in which unity is achieved between obedient faithfulness to the one's unique self-direction and the inspiration of Divine Providence. The experience of the transcendent is not self-directed, but should lead the self to an active response to the needs of humanity for justice, peace and mercy.<sup>14</sup> The impact of Formative Spirituality, as school and system, on Catholic public opinion may have faded, but its ideas regarding self, experience and self-direction are alive and well in the spiritual heritage of the Catholic Church in the United States.

Of a different but not less symptomatic importance is the cluster movement called creation-centered Spirituality. Connected with Matthew Fox, this movement is in fact a typical example of ideological indifferentiation and spiritual syncretism. All-inclusive by principle, it rejects hardly anything, provided the contribution or contributor take issue with a spirituality based on fall and redemption. Neither system nor concerted effort or program of formation, creation-centered spirituality advocates a cosmic

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<sup>13</sup>A. van Kaam, "Dynamics of Spiritual Self-direction," *Spiritual Life* 21/4 (1975): 261-282.

<sup>14</sup>For a more comprehensive overview, see A. van Kaam, *Religion and Personality* (Englewood Cliffs, N.J.: Prentice-Hall, 1964); id., *On Being Yourself: Reflection on Spirituality and Originality* (Denville, N.J.: Dimension Books, 1972); id., *In Search of Spiritual Identity* (Denville, N.J.: Dimension Books, 1975); id., *Human Formation* (New York: Crossroad, 1985).

passion about the blessing of life. The family tree includes ecological and ecological consciousness, Sufism, Zen, Celtic and Native American spirituality. Favoring global ecumenism, creation-centered spirituality operates with an organicist paradigm, encompassing in its "original blessing" not only the royal personhood of the individual but also cosmic divinization and panentheism. Creation-centered spirituality, opposing the dualism of saved-unsaved, wants to be a spirituality of the oppressed, and thus understands holiness not as the quest of individual perfection but as cosmic hospitality under the aegis of the cosmic Christ, calling all of us to our own divinity.<sup>15</sup>

Spiritual self-direction and creation-centered spirituality are embodying, each in its own way, what Tocqueville considered as ideological pillars of American religiosity, namely, the importance given to physical gratification in the present and private judgment. We find in creation-centered spirituality, with its experience and appreciation of life, some of the prevailing passion of the American people with physical gratification in the present. There is a Dionysian quality in its hunger for assimilation and integration of cosmological as well as ecological features of life. On the other hand, the importance of private judgment as authority for the definition of the spiritual life resonates strongly with spiritual self-direction, specifically with its pronounced psychological and anthropological orientation. However, in spiritual self-direction, Promethean as may be, the private judgment is divested in part of its Protestant heritage and turns the self into a spiritual person graced by the Spirit of God and his Providence. Its general orientation remains anti-dogmatic, just as creation spirituality articulates itself in strong opposition to dualism.<sup>16</sup>

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<sup>15</sup>See M. Fox, "Elements of a Biblical, Creation-centered Spirituality," *Spirituality Today* 30 (1978): 360-369; C. A. Campbell, "Creation-centered Spirituality for Today," *Spiritual Life* 27 (1981): 131-142; M. Fox, *Original Blessing: A Primer in Creation Spirituality Presented in Four Paths, Twenty-six Themes, and Two Questions* (Santa Fe, N.M.: Bear, 1983).

<sup>16</sup>A. de Tocqueville, *Democracy in America* (New York: A.A. Knopf, 1945; E. Kallas, "Spirituality on This Side of the Atlantic according to Alexis de Tocqueville," *Spirituality Today* 37 (1985): 292-303.

## II. MARY AND CHRISTIAN SPIRITUALITY

A. The Unnamed Spirituality 1. Marian Catharsis 2. Theological Incorrectness 3. Popular Endeavor 4. Ecclesial Liability 5. Impossible Ideal 6. Secret Garden 7. Anonymous Spirituality B. The Ecclesial Cornerstone C. The Parameter of Spirituality 1. Ecclesial Content 2. The Theological Foundation 3. Experience as Fundamental Condition 4. The Challenge of Wholesomeness a. Form or configuration of the spiritual life b. Expression or manifestation of the spiritual life c. Evolution of life trajectory of the spiritual life d. Environment or context of the spiritual life

### A. The Unnamed Spirituality

Our intention, up to this point, was to reproduce, with broad strokes, some of the more significant traits of the contemporary spiritual landscape of this country. In its struggle for spiritual identity, the Catholic Church is no stranger to this landscape. Much of what has been described here has become such an integral part of Christian and Catholic spirituality that it is difficult to define the so-called new religiosity and its proliferation of spiritual creeds and techniques.

There are, however, two important questions resulting from our evaluation of contemporary spirituality. How will, or does, the contemporary climate influence "Marian spirituality"? And, even more important, what is the place of "Marian spirituality" in this context? Beginning with the second question, it would seem that "Marian spirituality," whatever its exact meaning, is largely absent from the more public and generic expressions of spirituality, such as the ones described above. How can we explain this disquieting situation?<sup>17</sup> Indeed, why is Mary treated as an outcast? Why is she not more frequently mentioned in mainstream literature

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<sup>17</sup>See, e.g., *The Study of Spirituality*, ed. by Ch. Jones, G. Wainwright, E. Yarnold (New York/Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1986), a comprehensive presentation of Christian and non-Christian spirituality of past and present. Although Mary is mentioned here and there (with regard, e.g., to Celtic Spirituality, to Iconography, to black spirituality and as a model of virginity), there is no specific and independent treatment of "Marian spirituality" in this study.

about spiritual theology and spirituality? Here are some tentative explanations, some of them of a historical, others of a more foundational, nature.

### 1. *Marian Catharsis*

Although we have now crossed the threshold of the twenty-first century, reaction against the overabundance of all things Marian, typical of the Marian Century (1830-1950), seems to be lingering on. May it be remembered that there were at least 129 Marian congresses between 1947 and 1958, and that we count (for the sole period of 1952-1957) 5,758 references of devotional and theological writings about Mary. Applying the principle of *quantum potes, tantum aude*, for too long and with utmost generosity, Marian devotees of all colors may have contributed to a full pro-Marian tide and the subsequent slump and crisis in Marian devotion. The Marian century ended in spiritual exhaustion, or, as some authors<sup>18</sup> would say, in Marian elephantiasis and metastasis. The reaction was directed against the heavy-handed manipulation of the theological principle of convenience with regard to Mary, and the overly zealous multiplication of titles, devotions and privileges in her honor. It led to a period of Marian catharsis, to devotional dieting and theological reassessment, but it simultaneously created a certain anti-Marian mentality, fomented occasionally by elements—in and outside of the Church—hostile on principle to the Marian movement.

### 2. *Theological Incorrectness*

The fading of the Marian memory or its outright rejection is related to, among other things, a certain self-understanding of theology as science. Adopting a model of positive science—based on pure facts, quantifying description, and positive verification— theology, where this happens, is increasingly experiencing

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<sup>18</sup>Beinert, Laurentin, and Balthasar.

difficulties of living up to its adage of *Fides quaerens intellectum*. There are a number of reasons why Mary does not seem to fit this model. In addition to the scarcity of the factual material, there is uneasiness over the methodology with which a positive scientist has to approach a topic which is, in fact, a single person. Unfortunately, evolving in scholastic categories for too long and sometimes with the self-deceptive ambition of acting scientifically, Mariology may have unwittingly contributed to its own demise in the eyes of representatives of other theological disciplines. Furthermore, a champion of faith, Mary does not seem like an ideal object of pure science. Woman, virgin and "Servant of the Lord," Mary hardly appeals to adepts of historical-critical reconstruction of reality. Her name is not fashionable where the intellectual ethos of schools and currents identifies freedom of research with freedom *from* faith *as* faith. Finally, considered ecumenically incorrect, Marian studies are largely regarded as *quantité négligeable* or condemned to theological minimalism.

### 3. Populist Endeavor

Marian theology and spirituality are ostracized in academic circles for what is perceived as a largely populist religious endeavor. Populist endeavor appeals to the masses, fosters irrational behavior, promotes ritual practices, and frequently degenerates to a set of folkloric customs and patriotic observances. Usually expressed in group devotions, processions and pilgrimages, it may evolve, if appropriated by individual piety, toward patterns of subjective mysticism and superstitious behavior. Considered devotional rather than spiritual, its theological basis appears thin and is judged simplistic. By way of compensation, Marian movements generate signs and symbols which convey a sense of belonging and conviction, but then expose these movements to be seen as typical embodiments of unenlightened "opium for the people." Thus, all things Marian—meaning theology, spirituality and devotion—are wrapped into one and relegated to the level of cheap popular piety, good enough to placate the religious conscience of the masses.

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#### 4. Ecclesial Liability

Mary and Marian spirituality, frequently associated with the Pope and the Catholic Church, are seen as an unfortunate liability by people afflicted with the "Roman phobia." Because of this association with papal authority and dogmatism, the Marian model of being a Christian seems to be conducive to uncritical obedience and docile submissiveness. True spirituality, however, should include a personal commitment, based on freedom and not authority. Seen as catering to sentimental reasons or to the need of easy certitude and pious comfort, the Marian movement is suspected of being a tool in the hands of the Roman authority, eager to promote theological integration and religious uniformity. Opposition to Church and ecclesiastical norms is then easily directed toward Mary and her followers. Conversely, Marian devotees are quickly labeled as sectarians or traditionalists and, as such, are accused of being self-styled sentinels of the true faith and promoters of the traditionalist countermovement in the U.S. Catholic Church, and other national churches.

#### 5. Impossible Ideal

One practical and existential criticism against Marian devotion and spirituality is voiced by women more than by men, and by lay people more than religious: calling Mary an impossible ideal. This image arouses memories of times when Mary was presented as the exalted and somewhat abstract and remote heavenly lady who, at the same time, served as a demanding and overbearing model of moral perfection. Placed between Mary's unique grace and holiness, topping even that of the angels, and the problematic situation of human beings struggling with the consequences of original sin, not a few men and women have developed a growing resentment and even aversion to Mary. Instead of being seen as an affectionate and compassionate mother, she appears to be a domineering and cruel woman, and the figurehead of an impossible ideal. Although hailed by the Church as life-giving mother and sure way to her Son, Mary becomes in the eyes of many

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Christians, on the contrary, a roadblock to healthy self-valuation and spirituality, and thus an obstacle to overcome and a negative idol to be banished from their lives.

## 6. Secret Garden

Marian devotion and spirituality is alive and well in the lives of many Christians, but it remains hidden from public knowledge and attention. Western civilization, in general, is very secretive about personal religiosity. The same is true for certain versions and periods of Catholic Christian faith. Collective expressions of faith in ritual and liturgy remain largely impersonal and external. Authentic religiosity, on the contrary, is regarded as a private matter, something that occurs in the depth of one's soul, in the secrecy and intimacy of "myself and my God." There is a place for Mary in this secret garden; for even in the most masculine of souls, there is need for compassion and care, the craving for purity and simplicity, and a secret longing for the encounter with the "eternal feminine." And so it may well be that Mary is living comfortably in the secret garden of many men and women without ever being publicly acknowledged as mother and teacher of their spiritual lives. A good example of this situation is Thomas Merton. His writings about Mary are sparse, but when it comes to the journal of his spiritual life, the reader may easily recognize Mary as the secret patroness of his soul.<sup>19</sup>

## 7. Anonymous Spirituality

Could it be that "Marian spirituality" coincides so closely with Christian spirituality as such that the result is a perfect congruence between the two, leading to a *de facto* anonymity of "Marian spirituality"? There are religious persons, sometimes belonging to explicitly Marian groups, who are asking the question: Do we have

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<sup>19</sup>See J. Roten, "La place de Marie dans la vie et l'oeuvre de Thomas Merton," *Études mariales* 14 (1999): 83-294.

to make specific reference to Mary, to her name, her person and role; isn't it enough to practice her virtues of faith, simplicity and compassion, to mention only a few? It is indeed true that many a good Christian would abundantly qualify as a Marian devotee if judged by the concrete patterns of his spiritual life and the virtues practiced, rather than by a pledge to Mary's name or membership in a Marian movement. Clearly, many Christians—Protestants as well as Catholics—consider "Marian spirituality," as expressed in the famous adage "To Jesus through Mary," as an unnecessary detour rather than the *Via regia* of Christian spirituality.

### B. The Ecclesial Cornerstone

The reasons proffered why "Marian spirituality" remains conspicuously absent from many textbooks and dictionaries on spirituality could and should be regarded as somewhat ambivalent. Yes, there are obstacles, as described here, but some of them contain the seed of positive developments or have already led to new and promising realizations in Marian spirituality. Think of the *Marian catharsis*<sup>20</sup> brought about by *Lumen Gentium* (Chapter VIII) and *Marialis Cultus*. The spiritual portrait of Mary graphed in these documents, leaner and closer to human reality but nonetheless showing her as an eschatological icon and permanent model, has been widely acclaimed. However, the observations on "Marian spirituality" offered so far raise an important question: Whose is the proper voice to speak authoritatively about Mary and "Marian spirituality"? The voices here mentioned were those of various recipients of the Marian message, all of them bound to some degree by psychological and cultural conditioning of the recent present. It would be a matter of grave neglect to ignore these voices. But there is one voice which speaks as the primary recipient of the Marian message, and that is the voice of the Church.

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<sup>20</sup>See II.A.1. above: *Marian Catharsis*.



It is of utmost importance to keep in mind that all of Catholic theology is first and foremost ecclesial theology. Sacrament of Christ, who himself is the sacrament of the Father, the Church has received Christ's message and active presence to adore and ponder, to contemplate and act. This may sound like a *petitio principii* (an assumption), but it is in fact a historical reality grounded in the ontological relationship between Jesus Christ and his Church. Thus, theology (knowledge *about* God) and spirituality (knowledge *of* God) constitute the memory of the Church with, at its core, the preservation of the *memoria passionis, mortis et resurrectionis Jesu Christi*. Consequently, Mary is an integral part of the ecclesial memory, meaning that whenever speaking about Mary we should turn to the treasures of the Church's memory for accuracy and comprehensiveness, and strive for a living contact with her. Mary is the sacrament of the Church, just as the Church herself is the sacrament of Jesus Christ. And so the Church sees in Mary her archetype and eschatological icon. Blueprint and *Realsymbol* of the Church's final accomplishment, Mary is simultaneously the model or exemplar of being a Christian and living a Christian experience. For Christians, the fundamental charism is that of the Church, "the bride without spot or wrinkle" (Eph 5:27) whom Christ brought into being for himself, and who is archotypically realized in Mary, immaculate mother and bride.<sup>21</sup>

Thus, how does the Church perceive "Marian spirituality"? What is its meaning and scope? The expression "Marian Spirituality" is rarely used in Church documents about Mary, and where this happens it is of rather recent date. The habitual language used is that of practices and exercises of devotion, of "cult" or forms of piety towards the Mother of God.<sup>22</sup> The dominant elements are those of honor and supplication, existing in the Church from earliest times, but differing as "cult" from the cult of adora-

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<sup>21</sup>H. Urs von Balthasar, *Creator Spirit* (San Francisco: Ignatius Press, 1993), 290f.

<sup>22</sup>*Lumen Gentium* (LG), nos. 66, 67.

tion offered to the persons of the Trinity.<sup>23</sup> We are looking here at a "tribute of faith and love which Catholics in every part of the world . . . [pay] to the Queen of Heaven."<sup>24</sup> The first official Vatican II statement on Mary, though dealing with liturgy and not devotional practices, highlights the same overall attitude of love and honor: "In celebrating this annual cycle of the mysteries of Christ, Holy Church honors the Blessed Mary, Mother of God, with a special love."<sup>25</sup> However, in the same article we discover a different aspect of the Church's relation with Mary: In Mary "the Church admires and exalts the most excellent fruit of redemption, and joyfully contemplates, as in a faultless image, that which she herself desires and hopes wholly to be."<sup>26</sup> Honor and praise, as expressions of loving admiration and joy, are not an end in themselves. Admiration leads to imitation, and so, in turn, the Church desires and hopes to be or become a wholly "faultless image" of Mary. Mary is the "virtuous model" of the Church, but not only the Church but faithful individuals also are inspired by her "in the exercise of faith, hope and charity."<sup>27</sup> If admiration is closely related to intercession,<sup>28</sup> so are imitation and evangelization (or Marian apostolate). Living admiration breeds trust in Our Lady's help; imitation achieves greater synergy with who she is and what she does. The Church "looks to her who gave birth to Christ . . . in order that through the Church he could be born and increase in the hearts of the faithful."<sup>29</sup> However, the Church is concerned not only with the faithful, but she also "strives energetically and constantly to bring all humanity . . . back to Christ its head, in the unity of his spirit."<sup>30</sup>

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<sup>23</sup>LG, no. 66.

<sup>24</sup>Paul VI, *Mense Maio*, 30 April 1965 (Vatican trans.; Boston, Mass.: Daughters of St. Paul, 1965?), 5.

<sup>25</sup>*Sacrosanctum Concilium*, no. 103.

<sup>26</sup>*Ibid.*

<sup>27</sup>Cf. LG, nos. 53, 63, 65.

<sup>28</sup>Paul VI, *Recurrrens Mensis October*, 7 October 1969, no. 16; LG, no. 69.

<sup>29</sup>LG, no. 65.

<sup>30</sup>LG, no. 13; *Redemptoris Mater* (RM), no. 28.

None of these various aspects of Marian devotion is explicitly advertised as "Marian spirituality." It is only with *Redemptoris Mater* that this term is carefully, even hesitantly, introduced in the theological discourse. Speaking of the life of Christ's disciple, John Paul II mentions that there is a Marian dimension to this life, which is expressed in the "filial entrustment to the Mother of Christ" and has its origin and foundation in the testament of the Redeemer on Golgotha. Following the example of the beloved disciple, the Christian "welcomes" the Mother of Christ "into his own home," and makes her an integral part of his inner life, meaning he/she brings Mary "into his human and Christian 'I.'"<sup>31</sup> The Marian dimension (again mentioned in RM, no. 46) is here closely related to life and self, comprising both Christian and human life and self. In article 48, the insistence on life is once again palatable (RM, no. 48): "Here," writes John Paul II, "we speak not only of the doctrine of faith but also of the *life of faith*, and"—he immediately adds—"thus of authentic *Marian spirituality*." Repeating the expression "Marian spirituality" a second time, he locates its source: "a very rich source in the historical experience of individuals and . . . communities." John Paul II does not offer an explicit description or definition of what he means by "Marian spirituality," but it would be safe to say that Marian spirituality refers to the experience of a life of faith marked by a special Marian dimension. The latter, the Marian dimension, specifies, as seen above, that the faith-life of Christ's disciple is patterned on Mary's presence, her company—and here we go a step further—formative qualities on behalf of the disciple. Mary "cares for the brethren of her Son,"<sup>32</sup> "in whose birth and development she cooperates."<sup>33</sup> The lack of abstract definition is compensated by the remark regarding the importance of spiritual experience. Rather than offering a definition, John Paul II points to the example of Marian spiritual masters

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<sup>31</sup>RM, no. 45.

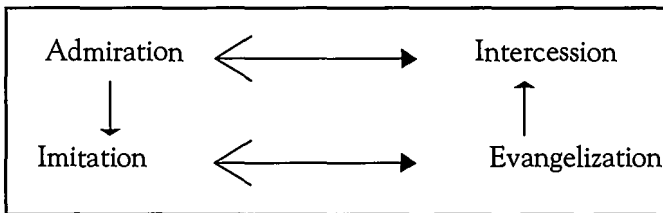
<sup>32</sup>LG, no. 62.

<sup>33</sup>LG, no. 63.

and devotees of past and present, such as Grignion de Montfort, and refers the reader to the Marian spiritual traditions of religious movements and communities. By the same token, the pope seems to suggest a difference between Marian spirituality and devotion, without going into details regarding their mutual rapport.

### C. The Parameter of Spirituality

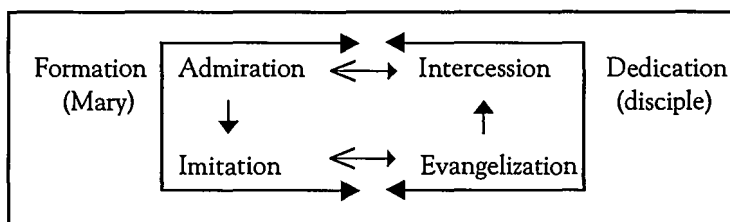
Summarizing the various elements gathered so far, we may say that Marian devotion and/or spirituality is essentially ecclesial spirituality, based on loving admiration for Mary which leads to intercession and imitation, and further concretizes in evangelization or participation in Mary's mission. It can be graphed as follows:



#### 1. Ecclesial Context

"Marian spirituality"—introduced as neologism in recent magisterial documents—adds a dimension of existential continuity and permanence to the relationship between Mary and the faithful. As a matter of fact, grounded in John 19:25-27, "Marian spirituality" stresses, with greater emphasis than before, the mutuality and interactive character of this relationship. Mutuality and interaction could be described as the complementarity of *formation* and *dedication*. Mary, the spiritual mother of Christ's disciples, "forms" the human and Christian "I" of her devotees toward receptiveness of and faithfulness to the Spirit of Christ, whereas the disciple

shows his readiness and availability in his dedication (consecration) to his spiritual mother. This new situation can be visualized in the following graphic:



At this point, we may enquire how this description of Marian devotion and spirituality relates to the broader concept of Christian spirituality. Is there what we might call a parameter of Christian spirituality describing with some accuracy its meaning, content and configuration? Knowing more about what Christian spirituality is meant to be, it would then be possible to determine with greater precision the meaning and legitimacy of "Marian spirituality."

Although used already by either Saint Jerome or Pelagius<sup>34</sup> to encourage a neophyte in the spiritual life ("Age ut in *spiritualitate* proficias"), it is not until Barnabé Saladin (*La véritable spiritualité du christianisme, ou la haute science des saints*, 1698) and Charles de Brion (*Le traité de la vraie et de la fausse spiritualité*, 1728) that the term "spirituality" achieves some prominence. However, during the first half of the twentieth century, and mainly under the influence of French spiritual writers and writings,<sup>35</sup> the term "spirituality" slowly but surely replaced such well-known designations as "interior

<sup>34</sup>Epistula VIII, 9; PL 30, 114D-115A.

<sup>35</sup>See Pierre Pourrat, "La spiritualité chrétienne, 1918-1928," *La vie spirituelle* (October 1919): 1, and *Revue d'ascétique et mystique* (January 1920): 6.

life," "asceticism," and "devotion."<sup>36</sup> Various authors highlight the experiential and reflexive character of spirituality. In its broader acceptance, and transcending a strictly Christian understanding, spirituality is a "basic practical or existential attitude of man which is the consequence and expression of the way in which he understands his religious—or more generally, his ethically committed—existence."<sup>37</sup> If spirituality in general is a typical way of handling human condition, so Christian spirituality is the experience, reflection and articulation of our faith as it is lived in a concrete human situation.

Authentic Christian spirituality, which embraces our daily effort to abide in God's love, needs to be patterned by specific criteria.

## 2. The Theological Foundation

Christian spirituality is the consequence of *theology*, meaning God's revelation about himself and his relationship with us. The testament of his revelation is the Gospel and its interpretation in Tradition. Thus, the Gospel must be regarded as norm and critic of all spirituality in the Church.<sup>38</sup> Revelation presents God as an altruistic God who is the source of existence but gives rise to beings outside of himself and unites these beings with himself

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<sup>36</sup> For more information on the term and meaning of "spirituality," see J. Leclercq, "Brief History of the Word 'Spirituality,'" *Studi medievali* 2 (1961): 705-709, and id., *Studi medievali* 3 (1962): 279-296; W. Principe, "Toward Defining Spirituality," *Studies in Religion* 12 (1983): 127-141; J. Tugwell, *Ways of Imperfection* (London: Darton, Longman, & Todd, 1984), vii-ix; P. Sheldrake, *Spirituality and History: Questions of Interpretation and Method* (London: SPCK, 1991); J. Alexander, "What Do Recent Writers Mean by Spirituality," *Spirituality Today* 32 (1980): 247-256; A. Amato, "Il problema della 'spiritualità mariana.' Introduzione ad un dibattito attuale," in *La spiritualità mariana: legittimità, natura, articolazione. Atti del 9o Simposio Internazionale Mariologico* (Roma, 3-6 novembre 1992), ed. by E. Peretto (Roma: Ed. Marianum, 1994).

<sup>37</sup> H. Urs von Balthasar, "The Gospel as Norm and Test of All Spirituality in the Church," in *Spirituality in Church and World*, ed. by Charles Duquoc; Concilium: Theology in the Age of Renewal; Spirituality, 9 (New York: Paulist Press, 1965), 7.

<sup>38</sup> *Ibid.*, esp. pp. 14-19.

(Rom 8:15-16). The Creator-God reveals and communicates himself as a trinitarian God, indicating thus fulfilled or satisfied love and, at the same time, willingness and desire to share this love with his creation. And, indeed, God's love is creative: he sets in our nature an affinity to him (image of God); makes of us "partakers of divine nature"; and bestows on us the grace of the New Creation, which is his own Son and incarnate love, Jesus Christ. Here is the reason why *grace* is to be understood as the vital principle of all spirituality. We need grace in order to share in God's nature of love, but we also need grace to obtain healing of sin, which is the discrepancy between our fundamental option for God and the (less than) full expression of this option in everyday decisions and choices (Rom 7:19). The grace of Christ is the highest form of God's self-giving, for in this most vital grace for all spirituality, we are in Christ and Christ is in us. In sum, theology tells us that spirituality begins with God and ends in him. Spirituality's noblest task, therefore, is to regulate our being in Christ.

### 3. *Experience as Fundamental Condition*

At the beginning of this relation, we stressed the importance of experience in contemporary spirituality. We made, however, the reservation that not the actual presence of a personal God, but radical experience of self was paramount in various expressions of the so-called "new religiosity." Experience is one of the highest and most unifying of all human activities, because it stresses the person's awareness of self in relationship with others, the world, or God. Experience is an essentially relational phenomenon involving active and passive elements; in particular, experience as "active passivity" brings our deepest powers into play, and can be found in the highest human experiences such as love, artistic creation and religious ecstasy. We find in experience an experimental proof that the human person is open *ontologically* to the world, to others and God.

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In religious experience the human person becomes aware of him-/herself in relation to God. We would like to highlight three of the most characteristic aspects of religious experience:

(1) It has *integrating* character, involving hierarchically all the main faculties of the person: intellect, will, affection, activity, and the social or relational dimension. Authentic religious experience unifies all of these aspects and transcends them in one simple and integrating act. The attempt to reduce religious experience to a single element, for example, affection, leads to loss of the very object of experience.

(2) The experience of the sacred, frequently described as fullness or nothingness, is a *mediated* experience. In the relationship between God and a human person, there is no face-to-face experience, no direct contact from person-to-person, that is, no presence of God without mediation. Religious experience is and remains a human act by which one receives God as both objective and subjective reality which addresses the whole person, and is accepted by the whole person. And so, God's presence to the person is mediated through God's promise to be present in certain acts and facts (for example, in his word and sacraments), as well as in his free initiative to be present in any sign, in prophecy, miracle or mystical experience.

(3) Religious experience is *dynamic* in character, because it is based on the simultaneous similarity and dissimilarity existing between God and the human person. The tension between these two poles makes the act of religious experience to be one of unfolding, self-giving and longing. It propels the person towards the infinite being. The riches found in God's self-giving are bottomless, never exhausted, but never possessed. The presence of God is not a reality given to us in full; it is, and remains, a reality of faith, hope and charity: *Deus semper major*. Religious experience is a continual search of God's presence at the heart of communion.

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The specifically Christian experience means grasping oneself in relation to God. It is self-knowledge both *in* and *for* God, "for knowing you, I shall know myself." This grasping of oneself shows both the greatness and the misery of the human person, and leads to union with the unknown god. Christian life adheres to God in faith, is united to him in charity, but, because it is partially obscure and subject to change, it must be supported by hope. However, and this is a decisive difference with religious experience in general, Christian experience is not its own norm. It is experience in Christ, and derives its value and fruitfulness from Christ. Radically open to the life in God through Christ, it must be an experience in faith and in the Church. Lived in the community of faith, and as expression of the communion of saints, it remains nonetheless a personal experience, a secret between God and the soul.

#### **4. The Challenge of Wholesomeness**

Having discovered that experience is a fundamental condition of spirituality, the attentive observer is able to see in spirituality a comprehensive activity which challenges the whole person. And, there is more. The spiritual life is an organic whole, and in many ways obeys the laws of organic life or of a living organism. As any organism, spirituality needs to have a life-giving form or configuration through which it expresses or manifests itself, manifesting, by the same token, the existence of the spiritual self. Every living organism is a historical being which follows a life trajectory or personal evolution. Finally, the spiritual life evolves within a specific environment or context. These four aspects contribute to the development of a wholesome spiritual life or organic whole. The history of spirituality is rich in personal examples and schools which document not only the great variety of its concrete realizations, but also the need for structure and organization.

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a. *Form or configuration of the spiritual life*

The history of spirituality knows of two principal forms of the spiritual life. It can be understood as (1) path to *union with God* or (2) as *sequela Christi*, the imitation or following of Christ. The path to union leads to divinization,<sup>39</sup> the indwelling of the trinitarian God in the soul,<sup>40</sup> the conformity with the will of God,<sup>41</sup> or the restoration of the human likeness with God (Gn 1:26f.). We have, on the other hand, the radical following of Christ in imitation of his disciples or as the post-paschal remaining and being in Christ (Paul and John). The various forms of the *Sequela Christi* encompass not only the martyr (as prototypical follower of Christ), but also those devoted to the humanity of Christ, to his hidden life (e.g., Charles de Foucauld), and his Sacred Heart. Nor should we forget the Christocentric spirituality of Bérulle. Likewise, the Spirit of Christ urges the disciples to a *life in the spirit*, which is the eschatological gift of Christ to all the faithful and which fructifies the whole Christian life. Whether understood as seven gifts,<sup>42</sup> discernment,<sup>43</sup> or a system of spiritual perceptions based on Scripture (spiritual senses), the gift of the Spirit supports and perfects our *sequela Christi*.

b. *Expression or manifestation of the spiritual life*

How does the spiritual life manifest itself; what is spiritual life *per se*? The classical expression of life in the Spirit is found in the reality of grace and articulated in the theological virtues of faith, hope and charity.<sup>44</sup> Each one of the three, regarded as "holy triad"<sup>45</sup> is inclusive of the other two, and together they constitute

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<sup>39</sup>"Divinisation," *Dictionnaire de spiritualité (DSp)*, III, 1374-1459.

<sup>40</sup>See Johannine and Pauline theology, the writings of Elizabeth of Dijon (1880-1906).

<sup>41</sup>"Conformité à la volonté de Dieu," *DSp* II/2, 1442-1469.

<sup>42</sup>"Dons du Saint-Esprit," *DSp* III, 1579-1641.

<sup>43</sup>1 Cor 12:10; 1 Thes 5:21; 1 Jn 4:1.

<sup>44</sup>See St. Paul: 1 Thes 1:2, 5:8-10; 1 Cor 13:3.

<sup>45</sup>St. Clement of Alexandria.

the essence of religion.<sup>46</sup> This unity notwithstanding, the history of spirituality comprises many currents or specializations where Christian existence concentrates on faith (Gregory of Nyssa, John of the Cross, Ignatius of Loyola), hope (Ignatius of Antioch, Francis de Sales, Teilhard de Chardin) or charity (from Augustine's *amor sui*—*amor Dei* to Francis de Sales's *Theotimus*). Given by God as answers to be given to his self-giving, faith highlights the all-encompassing and permanent answer to divine revelation, hope proclaims the future of God and human fulfillment in Christ, and charity celebrates the God of love and also the love of fellow human beings as practical verification of our love of God.

*c. Evolution or life trajectory of the spiritual life*

Life is an elusive notion. It can only be captured in substantive form as noun or activity. Such is also the case for faith, hope and charity as expressions or manifestations of the spiritual life. It is much easier to point out its evolution or trajectory. Based on the perception of the human being as *homo viator*, living in time understood as temporality and historicity (tension between freedom and determination), the spiritual life is compared to two paths leading to either life or death,<sup>47</sup> to light or into darkness.<sup>48</sup> Its dynamism suggests beginning, progress and maturity,<sup>49</sup> and so we find in the history of spirituality of our growth in faith, hope and charity. To mention only some of these models: there is Clement of Alexandria's ideal of the "true gnostic," Dionysius's *triplex via*, Bernard's "stages of love" (*amor carnalis*, *amor servilis*, *amor filialis*), Bonaventure's "Pilgrimage of the Soul to God," John of the Cross's "Ascent to Mount Carmel," and Thérèse of Lisieux's "Little Way" or "escalator" of spiritual childhood. Although based mainly on a contemplative lifestyle and sometimes on platonic philosophy, the

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<sup>46</sup>St. Augustine.

<sup>47</sup>Mt 7:13; Didache.

<sup>48</sup>Letter of Barnabas.

<sup>49</sup>Mt 3:5; Rom 6:4; Eph 4:14.

major lesson to be learned here is that most spiritual writers and saints believed in the possibility of continual progress in union with God or in the following of Christ, and thus saw a need for a program to promote growth and maturity.

*d. Environment or context of the spiritual life*

The individual vocation originates within the context of a call to the People of God as such (Acts 2:41-42), meaning that the spiritual life evolves in and through community, or, as we saw before, that Christian spirituality is church-related. This ecclesial dimension of spirituality is based on the very notion of life in Christ. Life in Christ becomes life in the Body of Christ and in commitment to and for the Church. The permanent presence of salvation in Christ is warranted specifically and concretely in the sacraments of the Church, and is expanded and "verified" in the Communion of Saints. Stressing a sacramental and juridical reality (*communio in sanctis*), this ecclesial dimension also means the spiritual union and solidarity of all those who are in Christ, and thus it fosters devotion to the saints and spiritual direction (*communio sanctorum*).

### III. ASPECTS OF "MARIAN SPIRITUALITY"

- A. "Spirituality of Spiritualities"    B. Variations on the Spirit of Mary  
 1. Potter or Facilitator?    2. Biblical Watermark    3. Who Is a Spiritual Person?  
 4. A Wholesome Spirituality    5. Ecumenical Facilitator  
 6. Criterion of Authentic Christian Spirit    C. Anti-Marian Forms of Spirituality  
 1. Apocalypticism    2. Esoterism    3. Spiritualism  
 4. Devotionalism    5. Moralism    6. Sentimentalism    7. Particularism  
 8. Symbolism    D. A "Triplex Via Mariana"

#### A. "Spirituality of Spiritualities"

The parameter of spirituality developed in the previous section brings us back to "Marian spirituality." Does "Marian spirituality"

reflect the criteria outlined? Or, from a different angle, what is Mary's contribution to Christian spirituality? Even more pointedly, can we agree with the lapidary observation that "Marian spirituality" is the "spirituality of spiritualities"?

Hans Urs von Balthasar, who used this expression, situated "Marian spirituality" within an ecclesial context. The self-understanding of Church is archetypically realized in Mary. As an individual person called by God and commissioned to become a principal actor in the drama of salvation, Mary is—in Balthasar's language—liquefied by the Holy Spirit and universalized "to become the principle of all that belongs to the Church."<sup>50</sup> This ecclesial possession, having universal or archetypal character, "Marian spirituality is logically prior to all the differentiation into individual charisms."<sup>51</sup> In other words, "Marian spirituality" forms "the true and universal, fundamental spirit of all the individual charisms."<sup>52</sup> Using the term "charism" to designate a God-given gift to and for the whole Church, spirituality becomes a charism expressing and simultaneously building up the Church. In this sense, Marian spirit in religious life and marriage is "expropriated readiness to serve."<sup>53</sup> "Marian spirituality" is pure readiness, pure transcendence of self, and pure correspondence. For Mary, "with her *Ecce Ancilla*, . . . is nothing other than the pure 'feminine' correspondence to the masculine *Fiat voluntas* of the New Adam."<sup>54</sup> In a different context, as he was discussing the various Church traditions emerging after Christ's ascension, Balthasar, after discussing the traditions of John, Peter, James and Paul, recognizes the Marian tradition as the first and fundamental one, the tradition which is the ultimate criterion of all other Church traditions.<sup>55</sup>

Establishing a type of equation between Christian spirituality and "Marian spirituality," Balthasar may have been the most ex-

<sup>50</sup>Balthasar, *Creator Spirit*, 295.

<sup>51</sup>*Ibid.*

<sup>52</sup>*Ibid.*

<sup>53</sup>*Ibid.*, 296.

<sup>54</sup>*Ibid.*, 295.

<sup>55</sup>Balthasar, *The Office of Peter and the Structure of the Church* (San Francisco: Ignatius Press, 1986), 320.

PLICIT but not the only defender of a "Marian spirituality" in recent times. A. Ziegenaus defined "Marian spirituality" as a "fundamental expression of Christian faith," or, better, as the foundational form of the believer's existence.<sup>56</sup> Mary's intimate connection with the very center of divine revelation, as mentioned in *Lumen Gentium* (no. 65), constitutes the foundation for the quasi-congruity of Christian and "Marian spirituality" and justifies it. As observed explicitly elsewhere, the Christian can thus be defined as *esse marianum*,<sup>57</sup> or, to quote a memorable saying by Paul VI, "If we want to be Christians we have to be Marian, meaning we must recognize the essential, vital and providential relationship which unites Mary to Christ, and which opens the way for us that leads to Him."<sup>58</sup> T. Koehler, in a recent manuscript on spirituality, used more restrictive terminology and spoke of the "Marian dimension of Christian spirituality" or "the way of the Lord Jesus with his mother, Mary."<sup>59</sup> Similarly, E. Llamas-Martínez described "Marian spirituality" as a modality of Christian spirituality, or as a spirituality rooted in Christian spirituality.<sup>60</sup> The question of whether there is a "Marian spirituality" or not was discussed by the French Mariological society in 1972, but they did not reach a convincing consensus. The general opinion was a preference to refer to a "Marian aspect" of spirituality, rather than to propose a "Marian spirituality" as such, since the Church is herself Marian. There seemed to be agreement, on the other hand, that all and any particular spirituality of the Catholic Church necessarily had

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<sup>56</sup>A. Ziegenaus, "Christsein und marianische Spiritualität," in *Christsein und marianische Spiritualität*, ed. by H. Petri (Regensburg: Pustet, 1984), 17.

<sup>57</sup>An expression frequently used by Klaus Hemmerle.

<sup>58</sup>Paul VI, "Ingente Christifidelium multitudini habita, in sacra Aede B. Mariae Virgini v. 'Nostra Signora di Bonaria' Calari dicata, Beatissimo Patre Sacrum peragente," 24 April 1970, AAS 62 (1970): 300-301.

<sup>59</sup>Theodore Koehler, "Mary and Christian Spirituality" (undated manuscript, chap. IV, 33f.).

<sup>60</sup>E. Llamas-Martínez, "Noción de la espiritualidad mariana," *Estudios Marianos* 36 (1972): 21.

or needed to have a Marian dimension.<sup>61</sup> It does not appear that "Marian spirituality" was ever explicitly studied by this learned society [the MSA], with the exception perhaps of Stanley Parmisano's contribution on Marian devotion in 1989.<sup>62</sup> It is true that this issue was raised more specifically in *Redemptoris Mater*, as previously noted. J. Castellano Cervera, in his commentary of the encyclical, states the following: The Marian dimension of the Christian spirituality (in *Redemptoris Mater*) stresses the fact that "true ecclesial spirituality belongs to its 'Marian' profile and thus to the way in which the Church receives, imitates and lives with Mary."<sup>63</sup> Choosing an anthropological approach, Stefano de Fiore boldly states: "There exists indeed a 'Marian' spirituality, in as much as there is coincidence, made into a system (or life style), between the spirit of the human person and the spirit of Mary which is totally oriented toward the Lord."<sup>64</sup> "Marian spirituality" leads to a comprehensive Christian spirituality, not least thanks to the intimate and unifying rapport between the faithful and Mary "under the influence of the Spirit."<sup>65</sup>

Fully recognizing that what is called "Marian spirituality" is the spirituality of spiritualities or the archetype of all ecclesial spiritualities, I would nonetheless caution against the use of the term "Marian spirituality." Yes, we have in Mary the premier and most Christlike (*Christoform*) of ways to live the Christian message in the project of life, but "Marian spirituality" does not point to the originality of Mary's way, rather it points to the typical way to live as Christians, being itself the archetypal realization of the Christian vocation. Only thus will we be able to implement

<sup>61</sup>See "Qu'est-ce qu'une 'spiritualité mariale'?", *Études mariales* 29 (1972): 121-132.

<sup>62</sup>S. Parmisano, "Marian Devotions: In and beyond *Marialis Cultus*," *Marian Studies* 49 (1989): 136-153.

<sup>63</sup>J. Castellano Cervera, *Le grandi linee della spiritualità mariana*, 174; cited in A. Amato, "Il problema della 'spiritualità mariana,'" 24 (n. 55).

<sup>64</sup>S. de Fiore, *Maria nella teologia contemporanea* (Rome: Centro di Cultura Mariana, 1991), 295.

<sup>65</sup>S. de Fiore, *Maria, Madre de Gesù* (Bologna: Dehoniane, 1995), 288; see also citations in A. Amato, "Il problema della 'spiritualità mariana,'" 25-26 (nn. 61, 63).

Paul VI's four orientations (biblical, liturgical, ecumenical, and anthropological) regarding Marian devotion. The common denominator of these orientations is Mary's relation and, simultaneously, her meaning with regard to Bible, liturgy, the world of the believers and human nature. On the other hand, there is in "Marian spirituality" something that is essentially and strictly personal—belonging to Mary alone and, therefore, not transmissible and not applicable to any so-called "Marian spirituality." Only those aspects of Mary's spirituality which can be understood and lived by all Christians are transmissible and operative.

Renouncing the term "Marian spirituality," we might do ourselves a service. Terminology has the advantage, or the disadvantage, to specify and separate. As mariologists and Marian devotees, we do not claim exclusivity and separation, but rather a better understanding of Christian spirituality, thanks to the lived and living example of Mary, the first of all Christians. We agree that "Christian" and "Marian" are interrelated, but the designation "Christian" presents more extensivity and communality. It should be an experience of great satisfaction for us to explain that this broad and multi-faceted current of Christian spirituality has evolved from and is alive thanks to a Marian genetic code. By avoiding Marian exclusivity, Christian spirituality can embrace two easily forgotten theological realities, indispensable for any sound "Marian spirituality," namely, the Holy Spirit and the Church. Starkly formulated, it could be said that "Marian spirituality" is ultimately not Marian but ecclesial, that it is not Marian but pneumatological. This applies in particular where "Marian spirituality" is understood as Mary's formative action on our behalf. It would seem necessary to explain this formative process as the combined activity of Spirit and Church coming to fruition through Mary (action of the Spirit) and in her image (action of the Church).

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## B. Variations on the Spirit of Mary

Let us ask again: "How can spirituality be Marian?" But let us rephrase the question as: "Why and how is Christian spirituality Marian?" The following reflections are offered with the sole intention to point out some of the riches of Christian spirituality lived in the spirit of Mary.

### 1. *Potter or Facilitator?*

We are familiar with the notion that Mary's role as spiritual mother is to form Christ in us. How literally should we take this? Is Mary indeed like the potter who takes a lump of clay—our spiritual person—and shapes it into the likeness of Jesus Christ? In other words, should we attribute to Mary a direct and efficient causality in the building up of our *Christoform* personality structure and the routing of our spiritual life trajectory? The question is worth pondering. Instead of calling Mary a potter, would it be more accurate to see in her "maternal presence"<sup>66</sup> the role and function of a facilitator? But in what ways and how would she facilitate? Could it be said that Mary facilitates the combined action of the Spirit and the Church? The direct and efficient causality of our constitution and growth in the spiritual life is the Church's sacramental activity; she gives us life in the Spirit and cares for it, principally through the liturgy. The Spirit, being the Spirit of Christ, supports the Church's action, directs and critiques it, and has the ultimate transformative power to fashion the New Creation of which we are a part.

Thus, could we say that Mary personalizes the Church's action, and concretizes the Spirit's active presence? Mary, as person, is a constant reminder that our life in Christ depends on the Church and the Spirit. In her, we gather and treasure love, trust, and commitment to the Church. Mary opens our hearts to the Church's "all-embracing motherhood,"<sup>67</sup> and at the same time steels our resolve to partici-

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<sup>66</sup>An expression favored by Pope John Paul II.

<sup>67</sup>Balthasar, "The All-Embracing Motherhood of the Church," a chapter in his *The Office of Peter and the Structure of the Church*, 183ff. This is a favored expression of the author, one used in many of his writings.

pate in her task of evangelization. She personalizes our relationship to the Church, and so makes us receptive to her salvific action. Furthermore, Mary has been called the masterpiece of the Spirit. In her, the elusive Spirit has taken form and spiritual excellence. She is not alone in the visible and active work of the Spirit; she is also a conductor of the Spirit's energy, of his light and warmth, attracting and radiating it. Thus, should we call her the ultimate facilitator of our spiritual life? The advantage of this approach would be to avoid any impression of a parallel track of salvation, any suggestion of a special and esoteric Christian tradition for the initiated few. At the same time, it would re-center the person and role of Mary as a link between the Church and Spirit and the individual Christian.

## 2. Biblical Watermark

The spirit of Mary warrants a truly biblical spirituality. The spirit of Mary is initially and progressively fashioned by the triune love of God. In and through Mary, we understand that God is love—love not perceived as simple sharing, but love as radical and concrete self-giving. Simultaneously, we are led to intuit that Mary's spirituality is formed by the triune God, and thus has a trinitarian configuration. It manifests itself in Mary's faith (Father), hope (Son) and charity (Spirit).

We know little about the evolution of Mary's spiritual life. The best we can say is that Mary's spiritual life-trajectory moves from an initial and comprehensive (but largely unspecified) "Yes" to God, through stages of progressive concretization of this initial Yes, and, further, that all of these forms of concrete consent were made in the service of her Son. They progressively ratify Mary's station *ἐν Χριστῷ* and fashion her *Christoform* personality. Balthasar used the expressions "de-privatizing" and "re-socializing" to describe the spiritual development of Mary.<sup>68</sup> Mary's life,

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<sup>68</sup>Balthasar, *The Glory of the Lord: A Theological Aesthetics*, I. *Seeing the Form* (San Francisco: Ignatius Press, 1982), 341: "Every shade of personal intimacy is taken from her, to be increasingly applied to the good of the Church and of Christians."

her leanings and aspirations are progressively "de-privatized," emptied of their subjective content, in order to become part and parcel of Christ's salvific work and the Church's mission (Calvary and Pentecost). A third aspect, which characterizes and thoroughly shapes Mary's spiritual life-trajectory, is the dialectical interrelatedness of virginity and motherhood, and its spiritual consequences. Her vocation to be Virgin-Mother impressed upon Mary's soul the fundamental spiritual law that fruitfulness is found only in self-giving. It shaped her life and her vocation as virginal mother through the contemplation of her Son's life, passion, death, and resurrection. In Christ's resurrection, she found the proof and existential certitude that there is fruitfulness in self-giving. Simone Weil once said, "If the Gospels omitted all mention of Christ's resurrection, faith would be much easier for me. The cross by itself suffices me."<sup>69</sup> The Virgin-Mother Mary is the exact anti-type of this spiritual attitude. She is the living proof that Christian spirituality is a resurrection spirituality.

The whole person of Mary is mission-oriented. Little or nothing of what we know about her suggests a self-centered and intimist ("private") spirituality. This may be why in Mary we also have the figure of what might be called an *anti-spirituality*—a life not based on structure, system, objectives and a plan of action. Mary's spiritual life is an *anti-spirituality*, because it is based on surprise, the unexpected, the sudden irruption of God in her life, which overturned whatever plans she may have made. Her spiritual life was not patterned on a solidly stabilized *scala perfectionis*, but on her experience that everything is grace and that our answer is docility to the Spirit.

### 3. Who Is a Spiritual Person?

If Mary's spirituality is the "spirituality of spiritualities," do we have in Mary a model of what Christian anthropology might call a spiritual person? In other words, are there some personality traits

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<sup>69</sup>Gordon S. Wakefield, "Protestantism," in *The Study of Spirituality*, ed. by Ch. Jones et. al. (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1986), 534.

or habits which define a spiritual person, and are these qualities archetypically present in Mary? Human development and maturity evolve according to laws of receiving and giving. We do not make ourselves, at least not in the beginning. First, we are receivers, and we build on this initial gift, only to realize that growth and maturity stagnate if we do not become ourselves givers. Call it exchange, interaction, commitment—human maturity, always approximate and difficult to pinpoint exactly, is only achieved thanks to a double relationality which links us to the source of life and, simultaneously, to the end or goal of our existence. All other relations in life explicate, concretize and support, or else invalidate, these two fundamental relations. The essentially relational character of the human person is experiential and tends toward wholeness, investing the whole person in as many interpersonal and infra-personal relationships as possible. We find in *Mulieris Dignitatem* the ultimate practical criterion to judge and guide human relationality: self-realization, it is said there, can only be achieved “through a sincere gift of self.”<sup>70</sup> Here we have the key to Mary’s spiritual personality. Her personality is constituted in the Annunciation. She truly and lastingly accepts God’s promise of free divine self-giving. Her readiness to be *Servant of the Lord* implies the readiness to accept all that she would experience in the concrete situations of her life as God’s will. This attitude of acceptance and fidelity also comprises lasting faith and hope in the ultimate yet mysterious benevolence of the triune God.

All of this means that in Mary’s existence, the initial yes grew into a permanent *Fiat*-structure. True religious commitment, because it was a personal acceptance of God’s project for her, had to be steeped in a sense of continuity and finality. In turn, total acceptance of God’s call and mission led Mary at Cana, Calvary and Pentecost—to name only the highly visible scenes—to become a gift for others. The readiness to accept, the readiness to persevere,

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<sup>70</sup>*Mulieris Dignitatem*, 7.

and the readiness to give are the three constitutive elements of the spiritual person.

As can be seen in Mary, the spiritual person is patterned and shaped according to what we called the *Fiat*-structure, or readiness to accept, to persevere and to give. The *Fiat*-structure comes alive, grows and matures, thanks to the theological virtues of faith, hope and charity. The readiness to accept God's promise or call is possible only in the grace of faith; continuity, perseverance or fidelity thrive in hope; readiness and creativity are nurtured in charity. The *Fiat*-structure of Christian spirituality, as it is typified in Mary, emphasizes the strongly incarnational character of our religious beliefs and behavior. Thanks to this *Fiat*-structure, the initial and foundational Incarnation of the Word was made a human and historical reality, but in its wake countless secondary incarnations of God's presence in this world were made possible. Thus, Mary's spirituality is typically Incarnation spirituality, and so is Christian spirituality.

#### 4. A Wholesome Spirituality

We have explored and articulated the meaning of spiritual experience and wholesomeness. Mary's spirituality is a highly experiential and personalized spirituality, as defined earlier. Similarly, her spirituality deserves the qualification "wholesome," because not only did her *Fiat* (and *Fiat*-structure) lead to a new unity between God and humanity, but it also transformed her whole being into an existence of total dedication to God and humanity, within the context of her historical person, as mother of the Church and of all humanity.

It is not possible for us to reproduce the uniqueness of Mary's spirituality. What comes closest to Mary's spirituality, and is readily available to us, is *liturgical* spirituality. May we assent that the most "Marian" of all so-called "Marian Spiritualities" is founded in the liturgy of the Church? Here we find a spiritual timeline repeated annually and punctuated with the special presence of Mary. This presence is offered to us as two different modes:

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(1) There is first the mode of Mary's *habitual presence*. Mother or older sister, she is accompanying her follower through the liturgical year, sometimes discreetly, sometimes more prominently. Her role is that of a guide who leads us on a spiritual path through the day (Liturgy of the Hours), to the eucharistic altar and, through the year, the memorial of the various seasons of salvation. Walking with Mary, who walked the same stations before us in faith, we become ecclesial persons, mindful of and practicing with ever greater sensitivity the *sentire cum ecclesia*. This first mode is her existential mode to exercise "maternal presence."

(2) The second mode is of a more *exemplary* nature. There are during the liturgical year the special Marian festivals for remembering and contemplating the person of Mary herself, and in a special way her Immaculate Conception, Divine Motherhood, and Assumption.<sup>71</sup> These and other Marian feasts are not only opportunities to deepen our understanding and love for Mary (as found in the Scriptures), they also represent the Church's own memory of Mary, fruit of *Lex orandi* becoming *Lex credendi*. This is to say that the Church's dogmatic patrimony regarding Mary is not alien to liturgy or spirituality. On the contrary, liturgy is the most integrative and experiential of ways to bind Scripture and Tradition into one, and thus offers the most comprehensive image of Mary possible.

Marian devotions complement the liturgy, but not because liturgy lacks spiritual riches. Marian devotions offer the possibility of developing a more individual expression of prayer and worship. Being subordinate to liturgy as to value and significance, and dependent on liturgy for their theological content, devotions highlight the importance of a personally assimilated and sustained spirituality. There exists a rich variety of Marian devotions to support this effort. Authentic spirituality will find a balance in the effective complementarity of liturgy and devotions.

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<sup>71</sup>See *Catechism of the Catholic Church* (Washington, DC: U.S.C.C., 1994), no. 2177.

### 5. Ecumenical Facilitator

Not a few theologians, Marian scholars in particular, recognize Mary's ecumenical potential, but few offer specifics regarding her role in this endeavor. It should not be limited to the fact that Mary has been invoked since early Christian times as the one who overcomes all heresies. However, if Mary is considered the representative of the human race who received God's revelation of salvation for all, she should indeed be recognized as a truly Catholic figure, one with universal theological significance. Mary's role as ecumenical facilitator is not limited to Christian ecumenism; it transcends Christianity and extends to the world religions (monotheism in particular). But what would be the platform of this universal Marian discourse? When speaking to representatives of other religions, we should refer to the essentials constituting the Marian spirit. Mary can be an ecumenical facilitator, if we are able to convey the following four aspects of her being. Mary stands for (1) Absolute priority of God in one's life; (2) Absolute openness to God's call and presence; (3) Lifelong endeavor to implement God's call in one's life; (4) Active witnessing of the *magnalia Dei* to all people. What Mary stands for must not necessarily and always be attached to her name. Ecumenism *in profundis* needs to see beyond emotionally perverted stereotypes to rediscover common depth.

So far, we have spoken about ecumenism *ad extra*. There exists, as far as Mary is concerned, a much needed ecumenism *ad intra*. As mentioned earlier, "Marian spirituality" is frequently the unnamed or absent spirituality. In some Catholic settings, Mary is neither welcome nor appreciated. Sometimes, merely pronouncing her name is considered unwarranted. Our effort among such persons could be the promotion of what I would like to call, though aware of possible ambiguity, an *anonymous "Marian spirituality."* The Marian spirit does not reside in Mary's name, primarily. It is expressed in the form of her life, and the spiritual qualities of her existence. Thus, with some caution, may it be said that there is room for the anonymous Marian spirit. A somewhat comprehen-

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sive listing of such anonymous Marian attitudes was given above. Other examples, like the practice of some typically Marian virtues (faith, hope, charity) could be mentioned. A recent dissertation has attempted to do just that; uncovering a "Marian attitude" in C. S. Lewis's work, the author discovered a Marian soul in a writer who wrote minimally about Mary.<sup>72</sup>

### 6. Criterion of Authentic Christian Spirit

Finally, we would like to mention the importance of Mary, or the Marian principle, in determining authentic Christian spirit or spirituality. In the first place, this applies to the Church herself, and was characterized by Cardinal Ratzinger in these terms: "The Church is not an apparatus . . . she is a person. She is woman. She is mother. She is living. The Marian understanding of the Church is the most decisive contrast to a merely organizational or bureaucratic concept of Church . . . It is only in Marian being that we become Church. In her origins, the Church was not made, but born. She was born when the Fiat arose in Mary's soul."<sup>73</sup>

Here are some other aspects of the Christian spirit and reality for which the Marian principle could serve as a form of check and balance.

(1) The Marian principle is a *feminine* principle, highlighting that all and any spiritual activity must be a responsive one and, as such, of a personal nature.

(2) The Marian principle is *dialectical*, because it characterizes the ecumenical attitude as one of self-abandonment and self-transcendence, the two being indissociable as in Mary's virginity and maternity. Fruitfulness is God's alone, that is the *Catholica*, but it is also a measure of our self-giving.

(3) The Marian principle is a reminder that apostolic dynamism has a *maternal* configuration. It is essentially the work of the

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<sup>72</sup>A. Mastrolia, *C. S. Lewis and the Blessed Virgin Mary: Uncovering a Marian Attitude* (Lima, Ohio: Fairway Press, 2000).

<sup>73</sup>J. Ratzinger, "Die Ekklesiologie des Vatikanums," *Communio* (German) 15 (1986): 52.



Spirit and its fruit in humanity. We must receive virginally (that is, purely, attentively and wholeheartedly) what is to become fruitful for the Church and the kingdom.

(4) The Marian principle is a principle of *communion*. It points to the interdependence between vertical and horizontal communion. The *connubium* between God and humanity, individually and collectively, flows over into communion between people. In particular, it enlarges the soul of the faithful to the concerns of the whole Church (*anima ecclesiastica*).

(5) Finally, the Marian principle places strong emphasis on the *analogical* character of the God-human relationship. Mary is the human/real symbol (*Realsymbol*) of finiteness receiving infinity, of finiteness giving itself over to infinity. This occurs in a way which neither absorbs finiteness into infinity nor negates or destroys infinity in the process of meeting finiteness. In Jesus Christ personified, analogy is actualized; in Mary, it is in process and progress.<sup>74</sup>

### C. Anti-Marian Forms of Spirituality

Not all expressions of Marian devotion and "Marian spirituality" are truly and authentically Marian. There are too many well-intentioned Christians for whom the mere mention of Mary's name serves as a cover for pious exaggerations, theological reductionism, and psycho-spiritual projections. Authentic Christian spirituality, which always has an engrained Marian dimension, proceeds from true faith, as *Lumen Gentium* reminds us, faith "by which we are led to recognize the excellence of the mother of God."<sup>75</sup> Being even more specific, *Marialis Cultus* speaks of attitudes of piety which are incorrect,<sup>76</sup> because they are "not in harmony with the Catholic faith and therefore must have no place in Catholic worship."<sup>77</sup> This exhortation seems to be all the more pressing as

<sup>74</sup>Some of these elements were developed in: J. Roten, "Ecumenism and the Marian Principle: Balthasar's Marian Quest for Catholicity," *Ephemerides mariologicae* 50/1 (2000): 87f.

<sup>75</sup>LG, no. 67.

<sup>76</sup>MC, no. 38.

<sup>77</sup>MC, no. 38.

many devotional practices of the past, some of which gave way to devotional deviations mentioned in *Lumen Gentium* and *Marialis Cultus*, have been retrieved and are being once again practiced by many of the faithful, with spiritual profit. Rather than ostracizing specific Marian devotions, we would like to pinpoint some of the more current anti-Marian attitudes which lead to the misuse or misinterpretation of Marian devotion and spirituality.

### 1. Apocalypticism

This attitude mobilizes Mary as doomsday prophet and inspirer of fear and trembling. We all have need for some motherly exhortation and sisterly warning in the face of the moral and spiritual challenges of our lives. And, as we know, the fear of God is to be counted among the Christian virtues. By unilaterally and exclusively projecting the image of the *Deus tremendus*, apocalypticism demeans the Christian notion of love, which is mercy, and negates the reality and challenge of the Incarnation. This approach diminishes the figure of Mary by depriving her of an essential dimension. Mary is the mother of Incarnation, of loving presence to the world, and, therefore, an active agent of its transformation in Christ; that is, she is *Mater rerum recreatarum* and no doomsday sibyl.

### 2. Esoterism

Too much of Marian devotion is built on Mary's role as *Dea ex machina*, and is linked to para-psychological realities such as special fragrances, weeping statues and rosaries turning golden. This is not a hidden or indirect criticism of apparitions and miraculous phenomena. But, indirectly at least, esoterism suggests an end to faith and the imminent dawn of beatific vision. Mary makes it possible. Instead of being a corollary to messages of conversion, prayer, and, in general, spiritual hardship, Marian esoterism reduces eschatology to the present and promises immediate spiritual satisfaction. Sensationalism, as esoterism is called in secular terms, favors spiritual consumerism and attributes to Mary magi-

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cal power. Many related examples could be given; one of them deals with the almost magical and superstitious way in which the consecration of Russia to the Immaculate Heart of Mary is promoted.

### **3. *Spiritualism***

There exists a certain tendency in Marian devotion and spirituality toward intimist or "privatistic" expressions of affection for Mary. "Marian spirituality" was never meant to become an "ivory tower" for Mary's devotees. Although contemporary spirituality puts emphasis on therapeutic concerns for a world in need of healing, Mary is not simply the gatherer, offering her followers the protection and warmth of her maternal womb. An orientation to action and apostolic endeavor are an integral part of "Marian spirituality." Being disciple and associate in Christ's salvific work, Mary is also a "sender," involving her followers in her mission of being mother of the Church and of all humanity.

### **4. *Devotionalism***

By devotionalism, we understand indiscriminate multiplication of devotional practices lacking true spiritual assimilation. At a time when more people are rediscovering the riches of Marian prayers and devotional practices (from the Little Office to many kinds of chaplets), it is of paramount importance to avoid two possible shortcomings: (1) devotion is not a mere technique, good only, like some "New Age" practices, to "channel" Mary's favor; (2) devotion should not become a ritualistic practice, having meaning only in repetition, affective intensity, and external gestures and postures. Similar to esoterism, devotionalism easily tends toward magical practices.

### **5. *Moralism***

Few would contest Mary's role as model for the spiritual life with its moral consequences. Mary is the archetypal pilgrim of faith, and so she becomes for us a model of faith, inviting a host of

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moral consequences, namely, self-giving and perseverance. Mary's moral exemplarity for us is intimately related to her spiritual and theological role. Her moral exemplarity takes its authority and receives its legitimacy from her role as theological person. This dependence and interdependence should neither be broken nor interrupted. Moralism does precisely this; it elevates Mary to the status of moral model without sufficiently grounding this status in her theological vocation. For example, certain ways of stylizing Mary as figurehead of sexual purity may be too farfetched. Mary is not defined as a model of sexual purity, but her radical self-giving allows for great simplicity, moral transparency and purity, which in turn can be found in and may, hopefully, lead to a chaste life.

## 6. Sentimentalism

This is one of the deviations explicitly mentioned in recent Church documents. True devotion does not consist in sterile or transitory affection<sup>78</sup>; sterile and ephemeral sentimentality are alien to the spirit of the gospel.<sup>79</sup> Sentimentalism can be assimilated to empty credulity.<sup>80</sup> It is related to sensationalism (already mentioned) and to spiritual consumerism, and has to do with religious titillation and generous self-indulgence. Sentimentalism is a heresy of distraction from life's deeper mysteries, because it dissolves the person of Mary and her role for the spiritual life to a sea of "Ave Marias" à la Gounod. One of the best ways of desentimentalizing Marian devotion is to pit it against solid theology and authentic spirituality.

## 7. Particularism

Particularism occurs where Mary is separated from the relational context which is properly hers and constitutes her as theological person in mission. Separated from her biblical origins, she becomes a myth; separated from the ecclesial context, Mary easily

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<sup>78</sup> LG, no. 67.

<sup>79</sup> MC, no. 38.

<sup>80</sup> Paul VI, *Signum Magnum*, 13 May 1967, no. 22.

mutates to "impossible ideal"; and separated from her Son, she degenerates to mere archetype. Marian particularism is an obstacle to both the spiritual and theological integration of our lives, and a hindrance to ecumenical dialogue. In the end, the practice of Marian particularism will make of Mary either a goddess or a wall flower.

### **8. Symbolism**

Where virginity is equated with personal autonomy, and the person of Mary stands for the feminine or maternal face of God, we are talking symbolism. Symbols have great potential of appeal and inspiration, but they have no original and authoritatively signifying role. Lack of biblical data and mere cultural appropriations of the figure of Mary may have adversely contributed to a proliferation of Marian symbols. These can be validated only by a constant reference to the historical person of Mary and the theological developments of Christian tradition. Growing symbolization of the person of Mary exhausts itself in the mere juxtaposition of images, and depletes the figure of Mary of its original meaning.

### **D. A "Triplex Via Mariana"**

Some of our theological considerations about Mary are heavy, laborious and intricate. They generate masterpieces of logical complexity and bulwarks of theological hermeticism. Conversely, the beauty of Marian spirituality lies in its extreme simplicity and existential single-mindedness. Embodied archetypically in one person, it is resolutely basic but also wide open for development, enrichment and implementation. And so it is our duty to preserve this beauty. In conclusion, I offer a visual summary of some of the fundamental and complementary elements of what some call "Marian spirituality." I would like to do this in the form of a *triplex via mariana*, using three icons. The choice of icons was not left to chance. They were chosen for three reasons:

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(1) The icon reminds us of the active presence of God's Spirit in and through the representations of his grace, as, for example, in Mary.

(2) The icon or "divine representation" is open or transparent to God: Mary could never be an obstacle to our quest for God, but she leads us to him.

(3) The icon invites a face-to-face relationship between image and onlooker, and allows for both admiration and exchange.

Our iconographical *triplex via mariana* is comprised of the types and images of the *Orante*, the *Eleousa*, and *Hodegetria*. These are among the most classical types of Marian icons. They are also the most ancient and permanent ones. Each one of them embodies a special spiritual attitude of Our Lady.

The *Orante*, with her outstretched arms raised in a gesture of intercession or more generally expressing a posture of receptiveness, symbolizes Mary's readiness and availability to God. She is spiritually transparent to the Divine and fully directed to God in an attitude that is inviting God's grace.

The *Eleousa*, or Our Lady of Tenderness, is pictured in intimate embrace with her Son, the Christ child. The icon expresses the loving exchange between God and a soul in prayer, contemplation and adoration.

In the third icon, that of *Hodegetria* (Our Lady of the Way), Mary points with her hand to the Christ child on her arm: "This is the way; he is your Life, Way and Truth," says Mary's gesture. She leads us to Christ, and so the *Hodegetria* embodies also Mary's mission and apostolic action.

The three images, of course, are more than a series of pictures. They do indeed represent a *triplex via mariana*. They symbolize the three steps of Christian and Marian existence: our quest for God (*Orante*), our life in Christ (*Eleousa*), and our existence for others leading them to Christ (*Hodegetria*). Lived as existence in faith, hope and charity, this *triplex via mariana* is of simple beauty. It reflects what Kathleen Norris wrote about Mary: "Ever since I first encountered Mary . . . I have learned never to discount her ability

to confront and disarm the polarities that so often bring human endeavors to impasse: the subjective and objective, the expansive and the parochial, the affective and the intellectual."<sup>81</sup> This is true also for the possible impasse of the Marian and the Christian. In Mary, the polarity of the Christian and Marian is overcome. In her person, Mary—Our Lady—embodies authentic Christian existence. Here is the reason why Christian spirituality bears the indelible watermark of the Marian spirit. "What is special in Mary's spirituality is the radical renunciation of any special spirituality other than the overshadowing of the Most High and the indwelling of the divine Word."<sup>82</sup> For Balthasar, author of these lines, the attempt to make "Marian spirituality" one among others is a distortion. But since everything in Christianity is from persons, for persons, in the person of Christ, the person of Mary cannot be eliminated from Christian spirituality. Christian spirituality can never be merely generic spirituality. Generic spirituality all too easily falls prey to a non-descript religiosity, itself only inches away from the pitfall of secularism. Mary's visible and articulate presence in Christian spirituality highlights and simultaneously warrants the deeply personal and active character of our response to the eminently personal call of God addressed to all.

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<sup>81</sup>Quoted in D. Schoemperlin, *Our Lady of the Lost and Found: A Novel* (New York: Viking, 2001), 315.

<sup>82</sup>Hans Urs von Balthasar, "Spirituality," in his *Word and Redemption, Essays in Theology 2* (New York: Herder and Herder, 1965), 97.