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"MARY BELOVED OF THE TRINITY"

*Sr. Ann Marie Harrison, I.H.M.**

1. Origin of the Title: "Mary Beloved of the Trinity"

The title *Mary Beloved of the Trinity* first came to my mind and heart in Advent 1981. I received this verbal icon through the Trinitarian spirituality embedded in the poetry of St. John of the Cross. The title itself is not in the poetry. The origin of this Marian praise came to me in silent time during which I felt the guidance of St. John of the Cross.

The words "Beloved of the Trinity," with reference to Mary, came as I read St. John's Romances on the Gospel, "*In Principio erat Verbum*," regarding the Most Blessed Trinity.¹ After seven sets of stanzas on the dwelling with the intra-Trinitarian love, the eighth Romance speaks of the Incarnation. The poetry conveyed to me a light on the Trinity "working in concert." The theological tradition regarding the Trinity working outside itself, *ad extra*, became luminously real. The stanza (Romance 8) on the Incarnation suggested to me the words of the title:

Then he called/The Archangel Gabriel/And sent him to/The Virgin Mary,/At whose consent/The mystery was wrought,/In whom the Trinity/Clothed the word with flesh.

And though Three work this,/It is wrought in the One:/And the Word lived incarnate/In the womb of Mary.²

These lines brought me a deep personal realization of the oneness of trinitarian love. I immediately wrote on the page: "Mary Beloved of the Trinity."

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¹See *The Complete Works of St. John of the Cross*, trans. by Kieran Kavanaugh, O.C.D., and Otilio Rodriguez, O.C.D. (2d ed.; Washington, D.C.: ICS Publications, 1979), 724-732 (hereafter cited as Kavanaugh and Rodriguez).

²Kavanaugh and Rodriguez, 732.

So, on December 6, 1981, I met the Holy Trinity in relationship with Mary, and Mary in relationship with the Holy Trinity.

The title brought me personal joy and I began to use it in a variety of ways in my ministry of Catholic education. At that time, I was not aware that Pope John Paul II would propose for the millennium 2000 observance the theme of "The Mystery of the Trinity and Mary." In 1989, as we approached the 400th anniversary of the death of St. John of the Cross (in 1991), I sent a letter to Pope John Paul II, whose dissertation was "Faith according to St. John of the Cross."³ A kind response arrived, signed by Msgr. Sepe, Assessor.⁴ I surmised that there was a file somewhere in Rome where my letter safely rested.

For the next seven years, I simply kept the title active in personal life and ministry. I continued to grow in the conviction that the title was to be a blessing for Christians, not only to honor Mary but also to participate with her in the identity of being "beloved of the Trinity."

However, I wished to consult with theological and ecclesiastical authorities about the title. I wrote to Cardinal William Keeler on March 25, 1996.⁵ My letter suggested consideration of the title in association with the Great Jubilee of 2000. Within a week, I received a reply from Cardinal Keeler, stating that he had forwarded my letter for review to Fr. Frederick Jelly, O.P.⁶ In his reply to Cardinal Keeler, Fr. Jelly noted there is no precise historical example for the title, but there is solid theological basis for the title in Sacred Scripture, Tradition, and the Magisterium of the Church. Father considered the title appropriately drawn from the poetry of St. John of the Cross. Further, Fr. Jelly agreed that the title should have fruitful pastoral results.⁷

John Saward, author and professor at St. Charles Borromeo Seminary, Overbrook, wrote to me in May 1996, "I agree entirely with Father Jelly's judgment. I hope and pray that devotion to Our Lady under this title will flourish and help us all on our journey toward more intimate communion with the Trinity."⁸

After a lecture at the International Marian Research Institute (summer of 1996), Fr. René Laurentin, while holding a bookmark I had given him of the title, exclaimed, "This title has no problem!" Then Fr. Laurentin watched me as I marked a circle with Trinity and Incarnation symbols and wrote, "We come from the Trinity. We return to the Trinity." Paralleling the second sentence, I wrote, "Mary companions our return to the Trinity." Father Laurentin's resounding "Yes!" remains with me still.

³Letter (from author) to Pope John Paul II, 28 September 1989.

⁴Letter (to author) from Msgr. C. Sepe, 23 November 1989.

⁵Letter (from author) to William Cardinal Keeler, 25 March 1996.

⁶Letter (to author) from William Cardinal Keeler, 3 April 1996.

⁷Letter (of Frederick Jelly, O.P.) to William Cardinal Keeler, 3 May 1996.

⁸Letter (to author) from John Saward, 31 May 1996.

In July 1997, I sent title materials to John Cardinal O'Connor through Fr. Michael L. Walsh. The Cardinal wrote in reply, "I will be happy to discuss this matter with Cardinal Keeler with whom I work closely on many important issues. Let's try to see what the Holy Spirit is asking us."⁹

In May 1999, I began attending the annual Mariological Society of America meetings. Since then, I have had numerous enlightening and supportive conversations about the new Marian title with various members of the MSA.

A question arose about the wording of the title in English and its translation in other languages—that is, whether "Beloved" should be preceded by "Most" (corresponding to the Latin *praedilecta*).¹⁰ My concern was that the use of "most" in English might indicate distance rather than preeminence, and diminish the sense of the presence of Mary. After consultation with many experts, I decided to remain with *Mary Beloved of the Trinity*. No comma is to be used between *Mary* and the phrase *Beloved of the Trinity*, since commas set off nonrestrictive phrases but do not set off restrictive phrases. The participle "beloved" makes Mary "the object of the Triune God's special predilection among those redeemed by her Son," as Father Jelly stated.¹¹

2. Purpose of the Title: Growth in Trinitarian Spirituality through Marian Presence and Praise

The title *Mary Beloved of the Trinity* opens an expansive and penetrating vision of the Marian dimension of the Christian life, specifically in relation to the Trinity. The title's power as a verbal icon contribute to the presence of Mary in our lives and growth in Trinitarian spirituality. John of the Cross's commentary on stanza 123 of the *Spiritual Canticle* tells us that God does not communicate with the soul through its knowledge of him, but through the love the soul has from this knowledge.¹² Continuing, St. John states, "For just as love is the union of the Father and the Son, so it is the union of the soul with God."¹³ Trinitarian spirituality is the living of the love received through knowledge of Jesus Christ, one with the Father, in the Holy Spirit.

Through the knowledge given to Mary at the Annunciation, there flowed an abundance of Divine Love from God's favor. To this communication of Love, Mary's own response to love was complete. Mary's love models, inspires, and invites our love to union with Trinity's love. It is with Mary that

⁹Letter (to author) from John Cardinal O'Connor, 15 July 1997.

¹⁰Conversation with Aristide Serra, O.S.M. (during 1999 MSA meeting, Washington, D.C.), resulted in the following translations: (in Italian) *Maria, la prediletta della Trinità*; (in Latin) *Maria, praedilecta filia Trinitatis*; (in Spanish) *Maria, la predilecta de la Santísima Trinidad* (from personal notations, 28 May 1999).

¹¹See note 7 above.

¹²Kavanaugh and Rodriguez, 461.

¹³Kavanaugh and Rodriguez, 461.

we can best offer Trinity worship from within the community of disciples of Jesus Christ.

With Pope John Paul II, we can say, "we Christians who know that the providential plan of the Most Holy Trinity is the central reality of Revelation and of faith feel the need to emphasize the unique presence of the Mother of Christ in history."¹⁴ Awareness of the Trinity's love for Mary and of Mary's presence in the Christian life contributes to lived Trinitarian-Marian spirituality.

Mary's relatedness with us radiates particularly from her graced presence in the faith-filled humanness of her person who journeys with us. We look back at her life and we see her present in our lives. Our prayerful attentiveness to her presence invites her to draw us into her attentiveness before God. Though we lack her fullness of grace, we do not lack the benefit of her Son's merits. It is through her Son that we return to the Trinity; and through Him we are gifted with her companionship, as we journey always with our eyes fixed on Jesus.¹⁵

The title has been anticipated by artists who have depicted Mary in the presence of the Holy Trinity. Frequently, paintings and stained glass windows portray Mary surrounded by the Trinity. Often, there is emphasis on the privileges of Mary in visual representation.

This verbal icon is an interior representation that unites Marian privilege and Marian presence. Because it is verbal, it can become present anywhere at anytime. While visual representation may convey Mary's beauty, the verbal icon carries the gift of Mary to the interior of the one who prays. Such interior beholding of Mary may generate Marian attitudes of faithful discipleship.

The canvas for this verbal icon is the human heart. Interiorly, we watch the restorative hand of God refresh our desire for holiness by our understanding of who-Mary-is-to-God in God's plan of salvation. Through her, there is clarity about who-we-are-to-God and one another. Therefore, the title is a painting of our creation and formation in the image and likeness of God.

Union with God is humanity's vocation through, with, and in Christ, after the example of Mary, first among the beloved of the Trinity. Mary's preeminence leads us near to the Blessed Trinity. It is a part of her nearness to us. Growth in Trinitarian spirituality is the purpose of the title. With Cyril of Alexandria, we pray, "Because of you [Mary], the Trinity is glorified and adored."¹⁶

¹⁴John Paul II, *Mother of the Redeemer (Redemptoris Mater)* (Boston: St. Paul Books and Media, 1987), 3.

¹⁵Hebrews 3:1, *NJB*.

¹⁶Cyril of Alexandria, as cited in Bertrand Buby, *Mary of Galilee* (3 vols.; Staten Island, N.Y.: Alba House, 1994-1996), vol. 3, *The Marian Heritage of the Early Church*, 299.