

# LIGHT & LIFE

FATHER REGINALD MARTIN, O.P., *DIRECTOR*

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## MARY, MOTHER OF MERCY

Reflection by Fr. Reginald Martin, O.P.

When we pray the "Hail Holy Queen," we address Mary as "Mother of Mercy." These are far more than elegant words; they describe the active role Mary plays in our life, for our theology teaches us mercy is sorrow for another's distress, coupled with an active will to relieve it. The will to relieve distress is a crucial element in this definition. We are not being merciful when we cry at the movies; to be merciful, our sorrow must be united with action. Mary is merciful precisely because, as the prayer continues, she shows us Jesus, her son.

God wants for nothing, so our relations with God cannot be governed by mercy. But in God's relations with us, and in our relations with one another, mercy is the greatest gift we can experience and the greatest gift we can offer, because mercy moves God, and us, to supply the wants we see in others. For this reason, Shakespeare observed

*The quality of mercy is not strained...  
'Tis mightiest in the mightiest; it becomes  
The throned monarch better than his crown.*

For this reason, too, in the Sermon on the Mount, Jesus promises mercy to those who show mercy to others.

In this issue of *Light and Life* we honor Mary as Our Lady of Lourdes, and in my reflection I will remark our Holy Father's calling Mary the model of our Christian life, especially the Mother of Evangelization. She is the first to preach the Good News, and she is also the Church's first tabernacle. Mary shows us that we must take God's word into our hearts. We must let it grow there, take on flesh and blood until, like her, we can present Christ to the world.

What this requires is the poverty of spirit Jesus commends in the gospel – emptying ourselves of "us" so that we can be filled with God. This opens up all sorts of hopeful possibilities, but it is also closely allied with humility. I cannot pretend to preach the last word on



Silhouette by Sr. Jean Dorcy, O.P.

this virtue, but I can say it is commonly misunderstood. The humility that makes us God's handmaids is not the lack of a good self-image; the poverty that will get us into Christ's kingdom is not just economic necessity.

What Mary calls us to is a radical honesty: realizing that compared to the rest of God's creation we are magnificent beings, but acknowledging that next to God we don't count for very much – until God decides to use us.

One of my Dominican brothers was preaching one day and read the gospel about the first being last and the last first. He got to the final sentence and said, "those who exalt themselves shall be humbled; those who humble themselves shall be exhausted." In a similar vein, my novice master once told me, "I prayed for humility, and God gave it to me. That's when all my trouble began."

*(Continued on page 4)*

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# THEOLOGY FOR THE LAITY

## The Ten Commandments, VII

### The Sixth Commandment: Thou Shalt Not Commit Adultery Part 2

By Father Reginald Martin, O.P.

#### LOOKING BEYOND THE NEGATIVE

We are, perhaps, used to thinking of the Sixth Commandment solely in negative terms, as a prohibition against the misuse of God's gift of our human sexuality. After all, the commandment tells us, "You shall not commit adultery." But if we look beneath the prohibition, we discover the commandment is a practical illustration of the chaste social relations our Baptism establishes among us and calls us to respect, cherish and nourish. Our *Catechism*, quoting the Second Vatican Council, expresses this very clearly,

*Chastity represents an eminently personal task; it also involves a cultural effort, for there is "an interdependence between personal betterment and the improvement of society." Chastity presupposes respect for the rights of the person....*  
(CCC, # 2344)

#### AN INVITATION TO COMMUNITY

The Sixth Commandment, far from demanding a personal isolation in which only married couples can enjoy the pleasure of human touch, invites us to open ourselves to one another in a respectful and cooperative joint sharing of our faith that makes Christ's kingdom a more visible reality in the world and allows us to realize our – and others' – dignity as His architects.

#### A CHALLENGE FROM POPE FRANCIS

A year ago, on the Solemnity of Christ the King, 2013, Pope Francis issued an Apostolic Exhortation, *Evangelii Gaudium* ("The Joy of the Gospel"), in which he discussed at length the missionary vocation, and the missionary challenge, facing every Christian. As the document's name suggests, this vocation should not be perceived as a trial, but rather a joyful and fulfilling enterprise, because it bears fruit for the God who has loved us first. It is also a reflection of the chaste love of Christ for His spouse, the Church.

#### MARRIAGE: THE PRIMARY EXAMPLE

We will always see this vocation made most clearly visible in the faithful love of married couples, and the Holy Father laments the threats to such love when he remarks, "*Marriage now tends to be viewed as a form of mere emotional satisfaction that can be constructed*

*in any way or modified at will."* (*Evangelii Gaudium*, #66) At the same time, he applauds the Bishops of France, who have issued a document in which they remarked marriage "...*is not born of loving sentiment, ephemeral by definition, but from the depth of the obligation assumed by the spouses who accept to enter a total communion of life.*" (*Ibid.*)

#### THREATS AND CONSEQUENCES

We do not need to look far these days to see the many threats posed not only to chaste married love, but to a chaste lifestyle itself. And here we ought to make a distinction between what our theology has traditionally named "sins of the flesh" and "sins of the spirit." The former, we are told, are more shameful than spiritual sins because they involve the desires we share with animals. (ST, I-II, 73.5) At the same time, they may also be less serious, simply because they are the result of weakness or lack of proper consideration. The most serious sins are not those we "fall into," but those we plan and commit deliberately. The Pontiff illustrates one sad example, which is not only the opposite of Christian marriage, but also the antithesis of the simple human respect demanded by the Sixth Commandment.

#### DELIBERATELY CHOOSING EVIL

This is a moral arena where our missionary zeal is desperately needed to counteract the deliberate blindness and greed of those who turn their back on the Sixth Commandment: the market in human trafficking. "*I have always been distressed at the lot of those who are victims,*" he writes:

*"How I wish that all of us would hear God's cry, 'Where is your brother?' (Gen, 4:9) Where is your brother or sister who is enslaved? Where is the brother or sister whom you are killing each day in clandestine warehouses, in rings of prostitution, in children used for begging, in exploiting undocumented labour? Let us not look the other way...."* (EG, #211)

#### THE ANTIDOTE OF CHASTITY

Chastity teaches us to govern ourselves so we have something to share with others. Ultimately, the consequences of sins of the flesh are far worse

than simply giving in to sexual temptations; they are considering ourselves and our wants the center of the universe to the extent that we succumb to a chill and selfish moral paralysis. St. Thomas Aquinas describes this as a disordered turning toward ourselves, and a turning away from God and our neighbor. (ST, I-II, 73.5)

A contemporary African writer sees signs of demonic activity in this self-absorption that seems so characteristic of modern life. “We are created attached to other people,” he writes.

*It is obvious, isn't it? Or maybe not. Well, to begin with, it took two to make the one you. And so you are naturally attached to those two people from whom you came... So God in His wisdom decided to bring us here in this attached manner in order to maximize our chances of survival....*

*Obvious as this may seem, how often do we find in our world today people who live as if they don't have any attachment to anybody? This thing called “attachment,” which we may sometimes feel as a burden, accounts for our having made it through childhood, and our being alive at all... However... how many people always think of themselves in terms of only themselves....*

*This is why the individualism in which we live is an incredibly effective strategy of the evil one... Thinking always of ourselves just in terms of ourselves is going to prevent us from detecting what may really be going on in our lives! For the simple reason that if we are created attached, our problems just can't be ours alone. (Fr. Yozefu Ssemakula, *The Healing of Families*, p. 89)*

## MAKING A BEGINNING

Where, we might ask, are we to find the remedy that will enable us to embrace and fully participate in the community we have been baptized into? Where, too, can we find the strength to cooperate with others and work effectively to make God's kingdom a reality in our world?

Cultivating a strong spiritual life is an essential element in this effort, and prayer and spiritual reading lay the foundation for deepening our spiritual life and encouraging our spiritual growth. In his Apostolic Exhortation, Pope Francis writes,

*There is one particular way of listening to what the Lord wishes to tell us in his word and of letting ourselves be transformed by the Spirit. It is what we call *lectio divina*. It consists of reading God's word in a moment of prayer and allowing it to enlighten and renew us... it should begin with... study and then go on to discern how that same message speaks to his own life....*

*In the presence of God, during a recollected reading of the text, it is good to ask... “Lord, what does this text say to me? What is it about my life that you want to change by this text? What troubles me about this text... no one is more patient than*

*God our Father... no one is more understanding and willing to wait. He always invites us to take a step forward, but does not demand a full response if we are not yet ready. He simply asks that we sincerely look at our life and present ourselves honestly before him, and that we be willing to continue to grow.... (Evangelii Gaudium, # 152-3)*

## THE ROSARY AND OTHER AIDS

The Holy Father identifies another aid in our personal spiritual growth – and in our sharing our faith – and that is popular piety.

*Only from the affective connaturality born of love can we appreciate the theological life present in the piety of Christian peoples, especially among their poor. I think of the steadfast faith of those mothers tending their sick children who, though, barely familiar with the articles of the creed, cling to a rosary; or of all the hope poured into a candle lighted in a humble home with a prayer for help from Mary, or in the gaze of tender love directed to Christ crucified.... They are the manifestation of a theological life nourished by the working of the Holy Spirit who has been poured into our hearts. (EG, #125)*

Members of the Rosary Confraternity need no validation for their devotion to the mysteries of Mary's Rosary, but we may nonetheless be grateful for the testimonial paid by the Holy Father. In this regard, Pope Francis establishes a link that extends to the 19th Century, with every Pontiff since Leo XIII paying tribute to Our Lady's special prayer.

## TO WHAT END?

Cultivating the virtue of chastity helps us develop a spirit of generous awareness of the world around us, and those with whom we share its blessings. Prayer enables us to see more clearly the community we have been baptized into. We may now reasonably ask the purpose of this spiritual rebirth and growth.

The answer lies in an axiom of our faith that teaches a gift is never given only to enrich the one who receives it; in our Christian life, gifts are given to be shared, for the enrichment of the Church.

In our last reflection we noted Baptism not only cleanses us from Original Sin but makes us members of Christ's Body, the Church. The sacrament gives us gives us a new name, and confers on us a new identity. Our *Catechism* teaches,

*Having become a member of the Church, the person baptized belongs no longer to himself, but to him who rose for us. From now on, he is called to be subject to others, to serve them in the communion of the Church, and “to obey and submit” to the Church's leaders. (CCC, # 1269)*

## BAPTIZED FOR MISSION

Moreover, those who are baptized, “must profess... the faith they have received... and participate in the

*apostolic and missionary activity of the People of God.”* (CCC, # 1271)

When we recite the Creed we express our belief in “Baptism, for the forgiveness of sins,” so we are used to considering the immediate, personal gift of the sacrament. Its communal dimension may come as something of a surprise, however, and we may be caught completely off-guard to learn that our Baptism is a vocation to active service in the Church.

Such, nonetheless, is the case, and we do not live up to our Baptismal promises if we do not allow them to identify us in our dealings with one another and the rest of God’s creation.

## **GOD’S IMAGE IN THE WORLD**

We may be surprised to find a reflection on the Sixth Commandment turning into a reflection on the Church’s missionary apostolate, but we must not forget the Commandments are designed to purify God’s image in us. The more our relations with one another are characterized by God’s unselfishness and willingness to reach out to one another – if only in prayer – the more clearly we show the world the image of God in whom we were created. Pope Francis observed,

*[Our] intercession is like a “leaven” in the heart of the Trinity. It is a way of penetrating the Father’s heart and discovering new dimensions which can shed light on concrete situations and change them. We can say that God’s heart is touched by our intercession, yet in reality he is always there first. What our intercession achieves is that his power, his love and his faithfulness are shown ever more clearly in the midst of the people. (EG, #283)*

## **THE EXAMPLE OF MARY**

Surely we will not be surprised that the Holy Father identifies Mary as the model of all we seek in our evangelical enterprise. He calls her the “icon of womanhood,” and writes that on Calvary, at the hour of the new creation, Jesus gave Mary to us so the Church would not be without a mother.

*The close connection between Mary, the Church and each member of the faithful, based on the fact that each in his or her own way brings forth Christ, has been beautifully expressed by Blessed Isaac of Stella: “In the inspired Scriptures, what is said in a universal sense of the virgin mother, the Church, is understood in an individual sense of the Virgin Mary...In a way, every Christian is also believed to be a bride of God’s word, a mother of Christ...Christ dwelt for nine months in the tabernacle of Mary’s womb. He dwells until the end of the ages in the tabernacle of the Church’s faith. He will dwell forever in the knowledge and love of each faithful soul. (EG, #285)*

## **TO SEE OURSELVES**

Wherever we encounter Mary in the Scripture, the evangelists want us to find ourselves. For that reason they paint her with such faint touches; they do not want

us to see her, but rather what she sees. They do not want anything to come between Mary and us. Her “yes” to the angel sets a rather challenging pattern for our response to God’s call, and her embracing God’s Word sets the pattern for our life of prayer and service.

The book of Genesis tells us “*the woman saw the tree was good for food, and a delight to the eyes*” (Gen. 3:6). Once they tasted it, however, our First Parents realized, in an instant, the fruit of the tree was neither useful nor pleasant. Instead, it brought them shame and exile. The Fruit of Mary’s womb is both the summit of our humanity, useful and beautiful. Eve discovered no pleasure in the fruit she ate, and ultimately we find as little pleasure in sin. In the Fruit Mary gives us, we find blessing, hope, and promise.

Mary reverses the Original Sin. By sharing Christ with the world, she invites us to reclaim the image we lost in the Garden. “*When He shall appear, we shall be like Him,*” St. John promises, “*for we shall see Him as He is*” (1 Jn 3:2). Our baptism unites us with Christ and restores the likeness of God sacrificed to sin.

Like Mary, we are called to take God’s Word into our hearts, and there to allow it to take flesh and blood so that, like her, we can present the human face of God to the world. ■

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## **LOURDES REFLECTION**

*(Continued from page 1)*

Mary, I think, would understand. Allowing God to determine our best and highest use is a risky and exhausting business. It means giving up the one thing we value above all others, which is control.

A friend once gave a calendar that contained a quote each day from the saints. One day I encountered someone I’d never heard of, John of Rysbroeck. He said

*Christ’s love is both avid and generous....His hunger is incomparably great: He consumes us right to the depths of our being, for he is a voracious glutton, suffering from bulimia and consuming the very marrow of our bones.*

The mystics can be as uncomfortable to read as the prophets. They mince no words. St. John’s imagery may be offensive, but it leaves no doubt that to be humble means to be poor – to allow ourselves to be devoured by God. The world continues to long for the human face and the human touch of Christ, and Mary’s example shows us that we have to provide them, at the cost of ourselves.

This, no doubt, is the reason Mary repeatedly commanded Bernadette at Lourdes to urge her neighbors to express sorrow for their sins. When we think of Lourdes the first image that comes to mind is probably its water, revered for its power to heal. Lourdes is indeed a place of healing, but Mary’s primary message to Bernadette was “Repent!” This is a reminder that true healing comes from our humble encounter with God’s mercy.

