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To Jesus Through Mary

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If we look at the world, at the People of God,^[1] during this month of May, we will see devotion to our Lady taking the form of many old and new customs practised with great love. It makes me very happy to see that this devotion is always alive, awakening in Christians a supernatural desire to

act as “members of God’s household.”[2]

Seeing how so many Christians express their affection for the Virgin Mary, surely you also feel more a part of the Church, closer to those brothers and sisters of yours. It is like a family reunion. Grown-up children, whom life has separated, come back to their mother for some family anniversary. And even if they have not always got on well together, today things are different; they feel united, sharing the same affection.

Mary continually builds the Church and keeps it together. It is difficult to have devotion to our Lady and not feel closer to the other members of the mystical body and more united to its visible head, the pope. That’s why I like to repeat: *All with Peter to Jesus through Mary!* By seeing ourselves as part of the Church and united to our brothers in the faith, we understand

more deeply that we are brothers of all mankind, for the Church has been sent to all the peoples of the earth.[3]

My own experience and yours are proof of the effects of sincere devotion to our Lady. I remember how in 1933 I went to visit a shrine in Spain, the shrine of our Lady of Sonsoles. It wasn't a pilgrimage in the normal sense: nothing noisy or elaborate, just three of us. I respect and love public demonstrations of devotion, but I must admit I prefer to offer Mary the same affection, the same enthusiasm, in private visits or with very few people — a more intimate sort of thing.

During that visit to Sonsoles I was told the origin of the name of the shrine. The statue had been hidden during the wars between Christians and Moslems in Spain, and after a number of years it was found by shepherds. According to the story,

when they saw it they exclaimed:
“What beautiful eyes; they are suns!”
[Spanish: *son soles*].

Mother of Christ, Mother of Christians

Since 1933, during many visits to shrines of our Lady, I have often reflected and meditated on the wonderful affection which so many Christians have for the Mother of Jesus. And I have always seen it as a response of love, of filial love and thanksgiving to our Lady, a sign of a child's affection. For Mary is closely tied to the greatest sign of God's love — the Word made flesh who took upon himself our sins and weakness. Faithful to the divine purpose for which she was born, Mary continues to spend herself in the service of men, who are all called to be brothers of her son Jesus. The Mother of God is also truly the mother of men.

Our Lord wanted it to be this way. So that future generations might know it, the Holy Spirit inspired St John to write:

“Now there were standing by the cross of Jesus his mother and his mother’s sister, Mary of Cleophas, and Mary Magdalene. When Jesus, therefore, saw his mother and the disciple standing by, whom he loved, he said to his mother ‘Woman, behold your son. ‘Then he said to the disciple, ‘Behold your mother.’ And from that hour the disciple took her into his home.”[4]

John, the disciple whom Jesus loved, brought Mary into his home, into his life. Spiritual writers have seen these words of the Gospel as an invitation to all Christians to bring Mary into their lives. Mary certainly wants us to invoke her, to approach her confidently, to appeal to her as our

mother, asking her to “show that you are our mother.”[5]

But she is a mother who anticipates our requests. Knowing our needs, she comes quickly to our aid. If we recall that God’s mercies come to us through the hands of our Lady, each of us can find many reasons for feeling that Mary is our mother in a very special way.

The Gospel passages about our Lady show her as the Mother of Jesus, following her Son step by step, playing a part in his redemptive mission, rejoicing and suffering with him, loving those whom Jesus loves, looking after all those around her with maternal care.

Just think, for example, of the marriage at Cana. Our Lady was a guest at one of those noisy country weddings attended by crowds of people from many different villages. But she was the only one who

noticed the wine was running out.[6] Don't these scenes from Christ's life seem familiar to us? The greatness of God lives at the level of ordinary things. It is natural for a woman, a housewife, to notice something was lacking, to look after the little things which make life pleasant. And that is how Mary acted. Notice also that it is John who tells the story of Cana. He is the only evangelist who has recorded this example of our mother's concern for us. St John wants us to remember that Mary was present at the beginning of the public life of our Lord. He alone has appreciated the importance of that fact. Jesus knew to whom he was entrusting his Mother — to a disciple who had learned to understand and love her as his own mother.

Let's turn now to the days between the ascension and Pentecost. As a result of the triumph of Christ's resurrection, the disciples are full of

faith; they eagerly await the promised Holy Spirit. They want to stay close to one another, and so we find them “with Mary, the mother of Jesus,”^[7] praying as a single family.

It was St Luke who related this fact, the evangelist who gave us the longest account of Jesus’ childhood. It is as if he wanted us to understand that just as Mary had a major role in the incarnation of the Word, she was intimately involved in the beginning of the Church, Christ’s body.

From the first moment of the Church all Christians who have sought the love of God — that love revealed in Jesus Christ — have encountered our Lady and experienced her motherly care. She can truly be called the Mother of Christians. As St Augustine puts it: “With her charity she cooperates in the birth of faithful to the Church and they are members of

a head, of which she is effectively Mother in the flesh.”[8]

It is not surprising then that one of the oldest witnesses to this devotion to Mary is confident prayer: “We gather under your protection, holy Mother of God. Do not reject the prayers we say to you in our need, but save us from all dangers, O glorious and blessed Virgin.”[9]

Getting to know our Lady

In a very natural way we start wanting to speak to the Mother of God, who is also our mother. We want to treat her as someone who is alive. For death has not triumphed over her; she is body and soul in the presence of God the Father, her Son, and the Holy Spirit.

If we want to understand Mary’s role in the Christian’s life and to feel attracted to her, to be in her company, we don’t need to go into

the theological theory, even though it is an inexhaustible mystery that she is the Mother of God.

The Catholic faith sees Mary as a sign of God's special love. God calls us his friends; his grace acts in us, winning us from sin, enabling us to reflect in some way the features of Christ, even though we are still wretched dirt. We are not stranded people whom God has promised to save. His salvation is already at work in us. In our relationship to God, we are not blind men yearning for light and crying in anguished darkness. We are children who know our Father loves us.

Mary tells us about this warmth and security. That's why her name goes straight to our heart. Our relationship with our own mother may show us how to deal with Mary the Lady of the Sweet Name. We have to love God with the same heart with which we love our parents, our

brothers and sisters, the other members of our family, our friends. And we must love Mary with that same heart, too.

How does a normal son or daughter treat his mother? In different ways, of course, but always affectionately and confidently, never coldly. In an intimate way, through small, commonplace customs. And a mother feels hurt if we omit them: a kiss or an embrace when leaving or coming home, a little extra attention, a few warm words.

In our relationship with our mother in heaven, we should act in very much the same way. Many Christians have the custom of wearing the scapular; or they have acquired the habit of greeting those pictures — a glance is enough — which are found in every Christian home and in many public places; or they recall the central events in Christ's life by

saying the rosary, never getting tired of repeating its words, just like people in love; or they mark out a day of the week for her — Saturday, which is today — doing some special little thing for her and thinking particularly about her motherhood.

There are many other Marian devotions which I needn't mention here. A Christian doesn't need to live them all. (Growing in supernatural life is not a matter of piling one devotion on top of another.) I would say, however, that anyone who doesn't live some of them, who doesn't express his love for Mary in some way, does not possess the fullness of the faith.

Those who think that devotions to our Lady are a thing of the past seem to have lost sight of the deep Christian meaning they contain. They seem to have forgotten the source from which they spring: faith

in God the Father's saving will; love for God the Son who really became man and was born of a woman; trust in God the Holy Spirit who sanctifies us with his grace. It is God who has given us Mary, and we have no right to reject her. We should go to her with a son's love and joy.

Becoming children in God's love

Let's think about this. It can help us to understand some very important things. The mystery of Mary helps us see that in order to approach God we must become little. As Christ said to his disciples "Believe me, unless you become like little children again, you shall not enter the kingdom of heaven."[10]

To become children we must renounce our pride and self-sufficiency, recognizing that we can do nothing by ourselves. We must realize that we need grace, and the help of God our Father to find our

way and keep to it. To be little, you have to abandon yourself as children do, believe as children believe, beg as children beg.

And we learn all this through contact with Mary. Devotion to our Lady is not something soft and sentimental. It fills the soul with consolation and joy to precisely the extent that it means a deep act of faith making us go outside ourselves and put our hope in the Lord. “The Lord is my shepherd,” says one of the psalms, “how can I lack anything? He gives me a resting-place where there is green pasture, leads me out to the cool water’s brink, refreshed and content. As in honour pledged, by sure paths he leads me; dark be the valley about my path, hurt I fear none while he is with me.”[11]

Because Mary is our mother, devotion to her teaches us to be authentic sons: to love truly, without

limit; to be simple, without the complications which come from selfishly thinking only about ourselves; to be happy, knowing that nothing can destroy our hope. “The beginning of the way, at the end of which you will find yourself completely carried away by love for Jesus, is a trusting love for Mary.”[12] I wrote that many years ago, in the introduction to a short book on the rosary, and since then I have often experienced the truth of those words. I am not going to complete that thought here with all sorts of reasons. I invite you to discover it for yourself, showing your love for Mary, opening your heart to her, confiding to her your joys and sorrows, asking her to help you recognize and follow Jesus.

If you seek Mary, you will find Jesus. And you will learn a bit more about what is in the heart of a God who humbles himself, discarding all

manifestations of his power and majesty to take the form of a servant. [13] Speaking in human terms, we could say that God outdoes himself, because he goes much further than he need in order to save us. The only way to measure what he does is to say that it cannot be measured; it comes from a madness of love which leads him to take on our flesh and bear the weight of our sins.

Can we realize that God loves us and not be overcome with love ourselves? We must let these truths of faith fill our soul until they change our life. God loves us! The Almighty who made heaven and earth!

God is interested even in the smallest events in the lives of his creatures — in your affairs and mine — and he calls each of us by our name. [14] This certainty which the faith gives enables us to look at everything in a new light. And everything, while

remaining exactly the same becomes different, because it is an expression of God's love. Our life is turned into a continuous prayer, we find ourselves with good humour and a peace which never ends, and everything we do is an act of thanksgiving running through all our day. "My soul magnifies the Lord," Mary sang, "and my spirit rejoices in God my saviour; because he has regarded the lowliness of his handmaid; for, behold, henceforth all generations shall call me blessed; because he who is mighty has done great things for me." [15]

Our prayer can accompany and imitate this prayer of Mary. Like her, we feel the desire to sing, to acclaim the wonders of God, so that all mankind and all creation may share our joy.

Mary makes us feel brothers

If we have this filial contact with Mary, we won't be able to think just about ourselves and our problems. Selfish personal problems will find no place in our mind. Mary brings us to Jesus, and Jesus is "the firstborn among many brothers."[16] And so, if we know Jesus, we realize that we can live only by giving ourselves to the service of others. A Christian can't be caught up in personal problems; he must be concerned about the universal Church and the salvation of all souls.

Concern for one's own spiritual improvement is not really a personal thing, for sanctification is completely bound up with apostolate. We must, therefore, develop our interior life and the Christian virtues with our eyes upon the good of the whole Church. We cannot do good and make Christ known, if we're not making a sincere effort to live the teachings of the Gospel.

If we are imbued with this spirit, our conversations with God eventually aid other men, even though they may begin on an apparently personal level. And if we take our Lady's hand, she will make us realize more fully that all men are our brothers — because we are all sons of that God whose daughter, spouse and mother she is.

Our neighbours' problems must be our problems. Christian fraternity should be something very deep in the soul, so that we are indifferent to no one. Mary, who brought up Jesus and accompanied him through his life and is now beside him in heaven, will help us recognize Jesus as he crosses our path and makes himself present to us in the needs of our fellow men.

On our way to visit the shrine of Sonsoles, which mentioned earlier, we passed some wheat fields. The

wheat shone as it waved in the breeze, and I remembered a part of the Gospel where Jesus said to his disciples: “Do you not say, There are yet four months and then comes the harvest? Well, I say to you: lift up your eyes and behold that the fields are already white for the harvest.”[17] And I realized again that our Lord wanted to put the same yearning into our hearts as he had in his own. And I left the road to pluck some ears of grain to keep as souvenirs.

We have to open our eyes; we have to look around us and recognize how God is calling us through the people at our side. We cannot turn our backs on others, ignoring them, because we are caught up in our own little world. That wasn't how Jesus lived. The Gospel often speaks of his mercy, his ability to feel the sorrow and share the needs of others. He consoled the widow of Naim;[18] he

wept at the death of Lazarus;[19] he felt compassion for the crowds that followed him with nothing to eat;[20] he also had pity on sinners, on those who go through life without knowing light or truth. “And when he landed, Jesus saw a large crowd, and had compassion on them, because they were like sheep without a shepherd. And he began to teach them many things.”[21]

When we are truly sons of Mary, we understand this attitude of our Lord, and our heart expands and becomes tender. We feel the sufferings, doubts, loneliness and sorrow of all other men, our brothers. And we urgently want to help them and speak to them about God, so that they can treat him as their Father and understand the motherly care which Mary is offering them.

Being an apostle of apostles

Filling the world with light, being the salt and light[22] — that was how our Lord described the mission of his disciples. To bring to the ends of the earth the good news of God’s love. All of us Christians should devote our life to doing this, in one way or another.

I’ll go further than that. We have to yearn not to be alone. We have to encourage others to help in this divine task of bringing joy and peace to men’s hearts. As St Gregory the Great says: “Insofar as you progress, attract others to go along with you, desire to have companions on the road to the Lord.”[23]

But bear in mind that, as our Lord tells us in a parable, the sower of weeds came “while men slept.”[24] We so easily allow ourselves to be carried away by the torpor of selfishness and superficiality, getting wrapped up in thousands of passing

experiences, that we avoid coming to grips with the real meaning of the world and life. A bad thing that lethargy, which smothers man's dignity and makes him a slave of sadness!

There is one case that we should be especially sorry about: that of Christians who could do more and don't. Christians who could live all the consequences of their vocation as children of God, but refuse to do so through lack of generosity. We are partly to blame, for the grace of faith has not been given us to hide but to share with other men.^[25] We cannot forget that the happiness of these people, in this life and in the next, is at stake. The Christian life is a divine wonder with immediate promises of satisfaction and serenity — but on condition that we know how to recognize the gift of God^[26]and be generous, not counting the cost.

So we have to awaken the people who have fallen into the dangerous sleep our Lord mentioned. We must remind them that life is not something to play with — it is a divine treasure which must grow. We must also show the way to those who have good will and good desires, but don't know how to put them into practice. Christ urges us. Each one of us has to be not only an apostle, but an apostle of apostles, bringing others along, so that they in turn will encourage others to make Jesus Christ known to everyone.

Perhaps someone will ask how we are to bring this knowledge of Christ to others. And I reply: naturally, simply, living as you live in the middle of the world, devoted to your professional work and to the care of your family, sharing the noble interests of men, respecting the rightful freedom of every man.

For over thirty years God has been putting into my heart the desire to help people of every condition and background to understand that ordinary life can be holy and full of God. Our Lord is calling us to sanctify the ordinary tasks of every day, for the perfection of the Christian is to be found precisely there. Let's consider it once more as we contemplate Mary's life.

We can't forget that Mary spent nearly every day of her life just like millions of other women who look after their family, bring up their children and take care of the house. Mary sanctifies the ordinary everyday things — what some people wrongly regard as unimportant and insignificant: everyday work, looking after those closest to you, visits to friends and relatives. What a blessed ordinariness, that can be so full of love of God!

For that's what explains Mary's life — her love. A complete love, so complete that she forgets herself and is happy just to be there where God wants her, fulfilling with care what God wants her to do. That is why even her slightest action is never routine or vain but, rather, full of meaning. Mary, our mother, is for us both an example and a way. We have to try to be like her, in the ordinary circumstances in which God wants us to live.

If we act in this way, we give those around us the example of a simple and normal life which is consistent, even though it has all the limitations and defects which are part and parcel of the human condition. And when they see that we live the same life as they do, they will ask us: Why are you so happy? How do you manage to overcome selfishness and comfort-seeking? Who has taught you to understand others, to live well

and to spend yourself in the service of others? Then we must disclose to them the divine secret of Christian existence. We must speak to them about God, Christ, the Holy Spirit, Mary. The time has come for us to use our poor words to communicate the depth of God's love which grace has poured into our souls.

In his Gospel St John has recorded a wonderful phrase of our Lady. At the wedding of Cana she turned to the waiters and said: "Do whatever he tells you."[27] That's what it's all about — getting people to face Jesus and ask him: "Lord, what do you want me to do?"[28]

The Christian apostolate — and I'm talking about an ordinary Christian living as just one more man or woman among equals — is a great work of teaching. Through real, personal, loyal friendship, you create in others a hunger for God and you

help them to discover new horizons — naturally, simply. With the example of your faith lived to the full, with a loving word which is full of the force of divine truth.

Be daring. Count on the help of Mary, queen of apostles. Without ceasing to be a mother, our Lady is able to get each of her children to face his own responsibilities. Mary always does the immense favour of bringing to the cross, of placing face to face with the example of the Son of God, those who come close to her and contemplate her life. It is in this confrontation that christian life is decided. And here Mary intercedes for us so that our behaviour may lead to a reconciliation of the younger brother — you and me — with the firstborn Son of the Father.

Many conversions, many decisions to give oneself to the service of God have been preceded by an encounter

with Mary. Our Lady has encouraged us to look for God, to desire to change, to lead a new life. And so the “Do whatever he tells you” has turned into real self-giving, into a christian vocation, which from then on enlightens all our personal life.

This conversation in our Lord’s presence, in which we have thought about devotion to and affection for his Mother and ours, can really give new vigour to our faith. The month of May is beginning. Our Lord wants us to make good use of this opportunity to increase in his love through dealing with his Mother. Let’s try each day to show her, through little things, little attentions, that we, her children, love her, that our holiness and apostolate are becoming something real, that we are making a constant effort to contribute to the salvation which Christ has brought to the world.

Sancta Maria, spes nostra, ancilla Domini, sedes Sapientiae, ora pro nobis! Holy Mary, our hope, handmaid of the Lord, seat of Wisdom, pray for us!

[1] Cf 1 Pet 2:10

[2] Eph 2:19: *domestici Dei*

[3] Cf Matt 28:19

[4] John 19:25-27

[5] Hymn *Ave maris stella: Monstra te esse Matrem*

[6] Cf John 2:3

[7] Acts 1:14

[8] *De Sancta virginitate*, 6 (PL 40,399)

[9] *Sub suum praesidium confugimus, Sancta Dei Genetrix: nostras deprecationes ne despicias in necessitatibus, sed a periculis cunctis libera nos semper, Virgo gloriosa et benedicta*

[10] Matt 18:3

[11] Ps 22:1-4

[12] *Holy Rosary*, Chicago 1972, p.12

[13] Cf Phil 2:6-7

[14] Cf Is 43:1

[15] Luke 1:46-49

[16] Rom 8:29

[17] John 4:35

[18] Cf Luke 7:11-17

[19] Cf John 11:33

[20] Cf Matt 15:32

[21] Mark 6:34

[22] Cf Matt 5:13-14

[23] *In Evangelia homiliae*, 6,6 (PL 76,1098)

[24] Matt 13:25: *cum dormirent homines*

[25] Cf Matt 5:15-16

[26] Cf John 4:10

[27] John 2:5

[28] Acts 9:6

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