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"HUMBLE AND MORE THAN A CREATURE"
Journey with Mary, Teacher of Integral Ecology

Mary – Sealed Fountain

Pope Francis concludes article 241 of the Encyclical '*Laudato Sì*', dedicated entirely to Mary's care for creation, by inviting us to ask for her help in learning "to look at this world with wiser eyes". Mary's wise eyes, in fact, know how to recognise in every element of Creation a sign of God's love for us. Living ecological conversion means, first of all, becoming capable of this gaze, from which we can recognise in respect and care for the environment and our neighbour, the fundamental call that God addresses to each of his creatures.

The first element of Creation on which we want to try to cast a wise glance, together with Mary, is water. The first account of Creation (Gen 1), presents the universe before God's creative act as a formless, deserted mass, shrouded in darkness and covered by primordial waters. In this primordial chaos, God intervenes with his creative Word to give birth to the world, separating the dry earth from the water. Chaos becomes cosmos: order, harmony, a hospitable place for life.

The habitable world that we know, marked by the alternation of day and night and the passing of the seasons, the world covered with vegetation and inhabited by a multitude of living beings, was, before creation, enshrined in God's thought and desire, just as a still shapeless child, newly conceived, rests in the dark immersed in amniotic fluid, contained in the mother's womb.

This analogy between the creation of the universe and the formation of the child in the womb is taken up by Scripture in Psalm 139, which describes God's creative work with every human being: while growing in the womb, the child is at the centre of the universe and it is in the womb that the first encounter between the human being and God takes place, according to Scripture (Jer 1:5).

Birth, because of the risks involved for the mother and the child, is the first act of salvation that God performs for every creature (Ps 21:10-11), so much so that Scripture uses this very metaphor to narrate the great event of liberation, the Exodus: the crossing of the Red Sea, in fact, is a great birth scene. Like an experienced midwife, God delivers the people from the danger of death and ushers them into a new life (Ex 14). He draws them from the waters to dryness.

Every human being, although he has no conscious memory of it, came from the water, grew up in the water and fed in the water of the womb until he was old enough to breathe on his own. Water is the element that mediated, throughout the entire pregnancy, between the growing baby and the

mother who cared for it. It is perhaps also for this reason that the Song of Songs compares the woman's womb to a spring, to which the man longs to return.

In chapter 4, verse 14 in particular, the beloved sings of the virtue of his beloved, calling her a 'sealed fountain'. Ever since the time of the Fathers of the Church, Christians have seen in this verse a poetic description of Mary's fruitful virginity: her womb is a 'sealed fountain'; in that, it has received none other than the child Jesus. Christian virginity, however, Mary's virginity in particular, is not closure. It is not merely renunciation. In fact, if we continue reading the Canticle, we read in verse 15 that from this ‘sealed fountain’ comes forth a water that irrigates a multitude of gardens, and in chapter 5, verse 1, the beloved invites his friends to satiate and quench their thirst with the beauty and virtue of his beloved.

The ‘sealed fountain’, then, is not a source from which one cannot drink; quite the contrary: it is a source of pure, uncontaminated water, whose water is not reserved for some, but is offered to all. Although she had no other children in the flesh, apart from Jesus, Mary's motherhood expanded beyond the boundaries of the space and time in which she lived. Her tenderness, her wisdom, quenches the thirst of all who entrust themselves to her. Similarly, our way of loving in our daily relationships in the family, with friends, in the community, requires purity of intention, great respect and not closure: the gifts of virtue and grace that we have received from God, first and foremost the gift of life itself, are given to us to be offered to the world.

In his preaching, Jesus himself uses the symbol of water, particularly to indicate the gift of the Spirit and the grace of rebirth that the believer receives through Baptism. Referring clearly to the words with which the beloved refers to the beloved in the Canticle, in John's gospel, Jesus promises the Samaritan woman an inner spring of living water gushing forth for eternal life (John 4:14). In Chapter 7, Jesus renews this promise by addressing all those who are willing to listen to him, while he is in the Temple crowded with people who have come for the feast: "Whoever is thirsty, let him come to me and drink; as the Scripture says, rivers of living water will flow from his bosom" (Jn 7:38). And immediately the evangelist comments: "This, he said referring to the Spirit that believers would receive in him: for there was not yet the Spirit, because Jesus had not yet been glorified" (Jn 7:39).

This emphasis is important, because it helps us understand two things: the first is that the disciples themselves, although living in close contact with Jesus, did not always understand his gestures and words. To understand that the promised living water is the Spirit, they had to wait for Jesus' resurrection: only in the new faith of Easter did they find the courage to finally open themselves to the gift of a truly new life.

Secondly, these words invite us to recognise in the gift of the Spirit the possibility of sharing the intimate communion of the Father with Jesus, which was fully manifested at Easter, when a river of living water gushed forth from the open side of the Son on the cross (Jn 19:34). That wound, moreover, remains open forever, so that we can always go and draw from it, until the water also becomes a living spring in each of us for eternity.

The second account of Creation states that four great rivers flow from the Garden of Eden, irrigating the whole world (Gen 2:10). Water, in fact, is life. Without water, the earth dries up,

creatures die. Thus, if God were to remove his Spirit from the world, everything would wither. But God promises his creatures both: water and the Spirit. Yet the experience of water scarcity and pollution is there for all to see, and affects especially the poorest of the poor. We have received the gift of life and we continually receive the gift of the Spirit: we are responsible, so that no living person should ever again die of thirst or disease caused by the poisoning of springs. Let us ask Mary to help us to do quickly and well, all that is within our power!

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