1. THE MOTHER WHO TAKES CARE

Pope Francis dedicates only one issue of the encyclical 'Laudato sì' to Mary's presence and role in creation, (241). Despite its brevity, it is a dense text, presenting Mary first and foremost as "**the mother who cared for Jesus**" and who "**now cares for this wounded world with maternal affection and sorrow**".

In the message given at the Angelus on the first day of the year 2023, Pope Francis offered an extraordinary commentary on this succinct expression, recalling all Christians around the world to the importance of caring: "*if we really want the New Year to be good, if we want to rebuild hope, we need to abandon languages, gestures and choices impelled by selfishness and learn the language of love, which is caring. Caring is a new language, which goes against the languages of selfishness*".

The adjective 'new' can refer to two particular aspects of the language of caring. First of all, to the fact that it is the language chosen by Jesus to manifest the face of God's love: the care that Jesus has for those He meets, in fact, is itself the Gospel, the revelation of the Father's face. Secondly, the systematic reflection on the ethics of care, which lies at the origin of the discourses so common on this subject today, is a consequence of the entry of women into philosophy and theology in the last century.

Although the capacity for care does not belong exclusively to women, moreover, as far as the personal development of this capacity is concerned, its starting point is inevitably found, for every human being coming into the world, in the relationship with their mother. Without the maternal care which begins at the moment of conception and manifests itself as acceptance, protection, nourishment, the human being coming into the world could in no way survive. This need is so true that Jesus, the Son of God, also needed it: to come into the world, he had to rely on the care of a woman. And it is for this reason that the Pope, in his message for the beginning of the New Year, points out precisely to Mary as an example and model of care: "She welcomed with wonder the mystery she lived, kept everything in her heart and, above all, cared for the Child, who - the Gospel says - was "lying in the manger" (Lk. 2:16). This verb 'to lay' means Mary laid the child in the manger with care, and tells us that Mary's own language is that of motherhood: to tenderly care for the Child.

It is important to remember, however, Mary was not alone in caring for the child. Joseph's presence, beside Mary, is to be equally estimated. A pregnant woman, who sets up her whole life to care for a new human being: body, mind, heart and time, in turn needs someone to care for her. The language of care, therefore, is a community language. African wisdom expresses this awareness through the famous proverb: '*It takes a village to raise a child*.' The original place of care, then, is not simply

the relationship between mother and child: it is that relationship, certainly, but embedded in a wider network of relationships. Precisely for this reason, when Joseph discovers that Mary is pregnant and would like to abandon her, an angel sent by God invites him to take charge, that is, to care, for the mother and the child.

If, therefore, in the personal relationship with our mother our capacity to receive and give care has blossomed, it is in family life that the language of care develops in its most beautiful form, which is that of reciprocal care, or care as 'teamwork'. Within the family of blood and in the larger family that can be the school, the parish and any other educational work, this is precisely the great challenge, the great call that awaits us as adults, parents and educators: not only to learn to express ourselves more and more and better through the new language of care, but to ensure that the children, young people, and young adults entrusted to us gradually learn to understand and express it. Don Bosco would call it 'family spirit' and say that the future of society depends on the transmission of this language.

Pope Francis therefore emphasises the link between education for care and education for peace, in daily life as well as in international relations, and invites all believers to regain awareness of the responsibility entrusted to us to build the future: in the face of the personal and social crises we experience, in the face of the tragedy of war, "we are called to face the challenges of our world with responsibility and compassion. And we can do this if we care for one another and if, all together, we care for our common home. We implore Mary Most Holy, Mother of God, that in this age polluted by mistrust and indifference, she may make us capable of compassion and care, capable of 'being moved and stopping before the other, as often as necessary,"

The Pope also indicates what the **concrete steps of care are**:

1. taking care of our life - each of us must take care of our own life -; taking care of our time, of our soul;
2. taking care of creation and the environment in which we live;
3. and, even more, taking care of our neighbour, those whom the Lord has placed beside us, as well as our brothers and sisters who are in need and call for our attention and compassion.

The order in which we are invited to take care of ourselves; of the environment in which we live and of our neighbour is not random: the first two directions of care, in fact, are the basis of the third, which is indeed the most important but which cannot sustain itself without the other two. The 'ecological conversion' so much desired by Pope Francis, therefore, cannot take place without each of the children coming into the world learning to think, speak and act according to the new language

of care. And in this journey of continuous renewal of our minds, hearts and hands, Mary's presence and help are fundamental!

Sister Linda Pocher – FMA