"Contemplating Christ through the Eyes of Mary: The Apostolic Letter Rosarium Virginis Mariae and the New Mysteries of Light"

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CONTEMPLATING CHRIST THROUGH THE EYES OF MARY:

The Apostolic Letter *Rosarium Virginis Mariae* and the New Mysteries of Light

Peter Casarella

Jesus Christ was once an unborn child in the womb of Mary. In those nine months the body of Christ was as close to Mary as every breath she took. Her intimacy with the Lord underwent considerable matura-

tion in the next thirty-three years. The tie between the two was a chord of faith that transcended Mary’s biological tie to the fruit of her womb and remained intact through his public ministry, death, and resurrection. Mary’s relationship with God began with the Annunciation, and it never wavered. Bearing the physical and emotional burden of carrying that child and being the Mother of God were not two separate tasks for Mary. They represented a single vocation, one bond of love with the Lord of life. Proclus of Constantinople, a defender of the title *theotokos* or “God-bearer” before it became an official doctrine, compares her giving birth to the weaving of the garment of Christ’s humanity. Here we encounter a beautiful image of Mary’s unique gift as God’s contemplative seamstress. God could not save the world “in the nude,” Proclus writes. In the womb of the virgin, Christ clothed himself with the garments of humanity so that we who are baptized in him may be clothed in the royal garments of his divinity.

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1. All internal references are to *Rosarium Virginis Mariae* (=RVM). This paper was originally delivered at a conference organized by the Focolare Movement in Washington, DC. The author would like to thank the members of Focolare for their support and encouragement in preparing it.

Thinking about a child-bearing Mary brings us to the heart of the Apostolic Letter Rosarium Virginis Mariae, a teaching promulgated by Pope John Paul II on October 16, 2002. Like Mary we encounter the person of Christ directly in the Rosary. The Rosary is not a magical incantation; Christ is not conjured up like a ghost. As with the wedding of Cana, he is present in the company of his Mother and is the one who alone offers us salvation. In the Rosary Christ challenges us to “mark the rhythm” of our painful and stressed-out lives by bringing them into harmony with the “rhythm” of God’s life (25). In the Rosary Christ does not address us as isolated individuals but, like the chain of beads itself, as persons striving to uphold bonds of communion in the home, workplace, and society. The flesh and blood of Christ is that mysterious “seamless garment” that wraps all the burdens of the baptized into a single spiritual whole. It takes on a concrete shape when we pray the Rosary, for in this prayer we praise the name of Jesus and meet Christ face-to-face.

Pope John Paul II is very devoted to the Rosary. Less than two weeks after being made Pope, he candidly admitted it was his favorite prayer. More than most papal writings, the prayer life of the Holy Father suffuses Rosarium Virginis Mariae. Each page is filled with real wisdom and concrete instructions for making the year of the Rosary an occasion for genuine spiritual renewal. How do you pray the Rosary? Rosarium Virginis Mariae leaves considerable room for local and personal variation. The basic element of the practice, using beads on a string to count prayers, derives from ancient monasticism. Western Catholics today typically begin with a sign of the cross and the Apostles Creed. The saying of the “Our Father” is followed by the recitation three times of the “Hail Mary” and once of the doxology “Glory be to the Father...” Five mysteries are prescribed for each day of the week.3 After the first mystery is announced, one prays the “Our Father” once and the “Hail Mary” ten times. The meditation on a single mystery (also known as “a decade”) concludes with the doxology and sometimes a prayer requested by the Blessed Virgin of Fatima.4 The same cycle of one “Our Father,” ten “Hail Marys,” and the doxology is repeated for each decade. After five decades one usually recites the words of the hymn Salve Regina (“Hail, Holy Queen”). This can be followed by these prayers, which are said responsively if in a group:

V. Pray for us, O Holy Mother of God.
R. That we may be made worthy of the promises of Christ.
V. Let us pray.

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3. According to the new sequence proposed in RVM, the joyful mysteries are to be said on Monday and Saturday, the sorrowful on Tuesday and Friday, the glorious on Wednesday and Sunday (with substitutions in Christmas and Lenten seasons), and the new luminous mysteries on Thursday.

4. “O my Jesus, forgive us our sins, save us from the fires of hell, lead all souls to Heaven, especially those who have most need of your mercy.”

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R. O God, whose only begotten Son, by His life, death, and resurrection, has purchased for us the rewards of eternal life, grant, we beseech Thee, that meditating upon these mysteries of the Most Holy Rosary of the Blessed Virgin Mary, we may imitate what they contain and obtain what they promise, through the same Christ our Lord. Amen.

The whole meditation concludes with a sign of the cross.

But the Pope's letter is not just a user's manual. There are several clues in it that demonstrate its wider historical significance. The first has to do with the Pope's proclamation of the Year of the Rosary, a period that extended from October, 2002 until October, 2003. On September 1, 2003, the Church marked the 120th anniversary of the call for a Year of the Rosary by Leo XIII, "the pope of the Rosary." Yet John Paul II is not one to dwell on the past. He also directs our attention to the post-jubilee year letter marking the beginning of the new millennium. The letter on the Rosary, he says, is like a "crowning" of Novo Millennio Ineunte. Using the Pope's favorite image of the apostles readying themselves to become fishers of men, the letter on the Rosary bids a final farewell to those preparing to go "out into the deep" (duc in altum) and meet the challenge of evangelization in the new millennium of Christianity (cf. 24). The Rosary can serve the agents of the new evangelization because it "is a compendium of the entire gospel" (1). Praying the Rosary is never an end in itself for the Pope. Its function is pastoral: to acquaint ourselves with the Gospel of Jesus Christ (cf. 17, 20). This practical christocentrism also offers us a glimpse of Mary's maternal role in the Church. Her role in raising Jesus extends to all the faithful. By analogy, Mary embodies the very motherhood of the church. She strengthens the promulgation of the gospel like a mother raises a child. With this Marian support, the church is constantly bearing new children and new spiritual fruit (15).

"To recite the Rosary is nothing other than to contemplate with Mary the face of Christ" (3). These simple words tell us all we need to know about the school of Mary, the beauty on the face of Christ, and the depths of Christian love. But what does it mean "to contemplate the face of Christ with Mary?" We are speaking about a special kind of vision, for the eyes of faith are found principally in the heart (10). Mary opens our eyes to the fresh new reality of Christ in our midst. But the goal is not just to gaze from afar. The Rosary teaches us, as St. Louis of Montfort knew so well, that "our entire perfection consists in being conformed, united, and consecrated to Jesus Christ" (15). The Rosary invites us to participate in

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5. The official English translation renders this phrase with the far less evocative "Marian complement."

the intimate relationship that unites Jesus and his mother. Spanish (and French) speakers recognize that there are two ways of knowing: getting to know a person (conocer a alguien) and learning an impersonal fact (saber algo). The Pope draws a similar distinction when he writes:

Christ is the supreme Teacher, the revealer and the one revealed. It is not just a question of knowing what he taught but of “learning him.” In this regard could we have any better teacher than Mary? (14, italics added)

In Spanish, one might say: “En la escuela de María conocemos a Jesús,” which means that education in Mary’s school consists of getting to know the person of Jesus Christ.

There are several meanings to “contemplating Christ with the eyes of Mary,” and I would now like to consider four of them. First, the Pope invites us to contemplate the image of Christ in the five luminous mysteries. Second, he calls attention to the form of prayer represented by the Rosary. Third, he asks us to meditate on the words recited in the Rosary and, above all, the central place accorded to Jesus’ own name. Fourth, he proposes that the Rosary can foster Christian unity.

**CONTEMPLATING CHRIST IN THE LUMINOUS MYSTERIES**

Before *Rosarium Virginis Mariae*, Catholics praying the Rosary focused on joyful, sorrowful, or glorious mysteries, but the new teaching introduces five new mysteries of light. These luminous mysteries call our attention to Christ’s public ministry and ask us to consider Christ as “light of the world” (Jn 8:12). These words from the Gospel of John also open the Second Vatican Council’s Constitution on the Church:

Christ is the light of humanity; and it is, accordingly, the heart-felt desire of this sacred council, being gathered together in the Holy Spirit, that, by proclaiming his Gospel to every creature (cf. Mk 16:15), it may bring everyone that light of Christ which shines out visibly from the church.

The mysteries of light reacquaint us with Christ’s light from a whole new angle. It is high time Jesus’ public ministry be included as part of the meditation. Equally important, however, is that we seek out Christ’s light reflected in the joyful mysteries of his incarnation and “hidden” life, the sorrowful mysteries of the passion, and the glorious mysteries that start with the resurrection. The story of Jesus and Mary was incomplete without the new mysteries, and now the public witness of Jesus’ parables, miracles, symbolic gestures, and preaching together can shed light on the whole narrative and the whole Rosary.

The first mystery of light is the Baptism in the Jordan. Even though he is sinless, Christ sets the baptismal pattern for the entire Christian life. Jesus does not launch his public ministry with a fundraiser and a press conference. The baptism of Jesus is a revelation of who he is as the Son of God. The word “Baptism” is derived from the Greek word “baptisma,” which means “dipping” or “immersion.”

The second mystery is the Miracles of Jesus. These miracles are performed both in private and public settings, and they are meant to provide evidence of Jesus’ divinity and to prove his power over nature.

The third mystery is the Mysteries of the Resurrection. These mysteries give us an understanding of the significance of Christ’s resurrection and the new life that he brings to all who believe in him.

The fourth mystery is the Mysteries of the Ascension. This mystery reminds us of the importance of Christ’s ascension and the fact that he is still with us through the Holy Spirit.

The fifth mystery is the Mysteries of Pentecost. This mystery celebrates the descent of the Holy Spirit upon the apostles, empowering them to continue Christ’s work.

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conference. His campaign, as it were, is initiated by a ritual act, a declaration of love by the Father, and the descent of the Spirit. Jesus’ baptism is a revelation of a whole new style of God’s involvement with the world. As a mystery of light, the scene recalls Jesus’ warning to the Pharisees that the arrival of God’s kingdom cannot be predicted: “No one will announce, ‘Look, here it is,’ or, ‘There it is.’ For behold, the kingdom of God is among you.” Not many people can just stare blankly at Jesus once they realize who is coming towards them. One way or another his arrival requires a concrete reaction, viz., some sort of change in the way you live your life. In fact, Jesus’ baptism reinforces that we are invited to respond, to see him “as the Son of God, to welcome him, to accept his coming into our life and his taking it upon himself, so as to submerge our ‘old man’ in the waters of baptism and to be born again to new life, a new creation, [becoming] children of God with him.”

The second mystery of light is the wedding at Cana (cf. Jn 2:1-12). This is the first of several symbol-laden events that constitute the “book of signs” in the Gospel of John. The Pope does not treat the miracle of changing water into wine as an isolated event. He situates the miracle, an indicator of God’s glory in Jesus Christ, in the context of a dynamic conversion. The dramatic setting of this mystery places us without any doubt in the school of Mary. Accordingly, he calls Mary “the first among believers” and says that thanks to her intervention Jesus acts to “open the hearts of the disciples to faith” (21, cf. 16). In other words, the wedding banquet is Jesus’ ministry: The feast draws everyone closer to him and the love of the triune God that he embodies. As we shall see shortly, the real presence of personal, shared love is what links this mystery to the institution of the Eucharist.

The third mystery of light is the preaching by which Jesus proclaims the coming of the Kingdom of God, calls to conversion (cf. Mk 1:15) and forgives the sins of all who draw near to him in humble trust (cf. Mk 2:3-13; Lk 7:47-48) (RVM, 21).

“The kingdom of God.” I doubt there is a single concept in the New Testament that has provoked as much pathos and controversy as this one. Gerard Rossé highlights two principal senses of the term. On the one hand, the kingdom is a place of divine favor into which, for example, the little children will enter (Mt 18:3). But the kingdom also represents a power to announce a coming reign that will break deci-

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The next mystery is unmistakably luminous, viz., the Transfiguration. The transfiguration occurs in the context of the disciples’ becoming aware of Jesus’ identity as the Messiah and along with the first announcement of his passion.

The final mystery is the institution of the Eucharist. The words and gestures are so familiar that we can scarcely grasp their novelty. Try to consider with fresh eyes and a docile heart the cup of wine that Jesus offers to his disciples. On one level, the blessing of the cup is that of a Jewish father at a meal with family and friends. Jesus too is offering thanksgiving to the Father (as we do when we pray the Our Father at the beginning of each mystery of the Rosary). But he also asks his disciples to partake of a new covenant, one that fulfills the sacrificial offerings of the past and sets a new stage. More than just an ordinary blessing, he is now teaching them about how God’s plan of salvation will unfold in his coming death and resurrection. Moreover, Jesus identifies the pouring of the wine with his own self-offering. In the succinct words of Matthew’s Gospel: “...for this is my blood of the covenant, which will be shed on behalf of many for the forgiveness of sins” (Mt 26:28). Offering himself in sacrifice is a perpetual stance that Christ undergoes for the sake of humanity. We can contemplate the face of Christ and he offers his suffering challenges us to grow in faith and love.

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13. Mk 8:34-38; Lk 9:23-26; Mt 16:24-28.
of Christ in all of this. He gathers the community and blesses the wine. He fulfills the old covenant. He dies for the sake of our salvation. He offers himself to us in the blessing cup of the Eucharist. His presence is his offering. This gift of his love is forever in our midst and even challenges us to offer ourselves as gifts.

One obvious question presents itself with regard to all the luminous mysteries: "Where was Mary during Jesus’ public ministry?" The Gospels report very few public appearances during this time, but they come at pivotal moments. The silence is punctuated by an utterance at Cana, words that have become a kind of Marian christological motto: "Do whatever he says." In the context of the mysteries of light, Mary’s admonition lies at the center. It comes after the voice from heaven at Jesus’ baptism declares "You are my beloved Son. On you my favor rests." and before the glorious theophany of the transfiguration. Mary’s own personality becomes transparent at Cana, and Jesus does not even address her by name in John’s Gospel. Yet her voice is hardly drowned out in the process. The utterance of these words is one of the most dramatic gestures in the Gospels. She makes a request with the expectation of an immediate response. In her obedience to her son, she too symbolizes a new reality. She is at once the faithful mother of Jesus and the expectant Daughter of Zion. In Mary divine speech indicating Jesus’ divine origin reverberates in a human way. She does not enflesh the Word of God; nor is she a prophet like John the Baptist or Elijah. She is, to adapt an expression from Meister Eckhart, an adverb modifying God’s verb. Jesus beckons us into his presence, and his mother says, "Come quickly!"

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THE ROSARY AS CONTEMPLATIVE CHRISTIAN PRAYER

By clinging to the beads of the Rosary, we are not grasping an amulet. We are learning the art of prayer and learning about Christ from Mary. In order to understand Mary’s way of contemplation, the Holy Father gives us a richly detailed description of the different ways that she looks at Christ:

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15. See Hubertus Blaumeister, “The fifth Luminous Mystery: The Institution of the Eucharist,” address from International Marian Congress in Castel Gandolfo (Rome), April 28-30, 2003. Blaumeister writes: “Seen through the eyes of Mary, the Eucharist fills us with very great hope. It turns our gaze towards Heaven, but at the same time roots us here on earth. It helps us to discover the meaning of love, of life, who we are and who others are, how precious we are—divine life throbbing in our veins!—and how we can fulfill ourselves only through self-giving.”


17. On the latter title, see Zep 3:14ff., Zac 9-9, Lumen Gentium 55, and Joseph Ratzinger, Daughter Zion: Meditations on the Church’s Marian Belief (San Francisco: Ignatius, 1983).

Mary’s gaze, ever filled with adoration and wonder, would never leave him. At times it would be a questioning look, as in the episode of the finding in the Temple: “Son, why have you treated us so?” (Lk 2:48); it would always be a penetrating gaze, one capable of deeply understanding Jesus, even to the point of perceiving his hidden feelings and anticipating his decisions, as at Cana (cf. Jn 2:5). At other times it would be a look of sorrow, especially beneath the Cross, where her vision would still be that of a mother giving birth, for Mary not only shared the passion and death of her Son, she also received the new Son given to her in the beloved disciple (cf. Jn 19:26-27). On the morning of Easter hers would be a gaze radiant with the joy of the Resurrection, and finally, on the day of Pentecost, a gaze afire with the outpouring of the Spirit (cf. Acts 1:14). (RVM 10)

In the school of Mary, each gaze would be a separate class. Mary questions, penetrates, mourns, rejoices, and is filled with the Spirit. Our teacher is a multifaceted Christian lay woman. She is no doormat, no timid wallflower. In proclaiming the greatness of the Lord in the Magnificat, she asserts without remorse that he sends the rich empty away and raises the lowly to high places. She is a thinker. She pondered the meaning of the dramatic events taking place in her midst. Her pensive response to the Lord is what makes her the seat of all Christian wisdom and the source of all true philosophy. She is also a woman of sorrows at the foot of the Cross, a herald of good news at the Resurrection, and a co-witness to the birth of the church at Pentecost. With Mary the life of an underclass Jewish maiden becomes the stage upon which the mystery of salvation is performed. In all of these guises, her gaze remains fixed on the face of Christ. Mary has no attraction to ephemeral appearances. She is blind to fads but remains receptive to all that transpires in her midst. She understands with compassion the world’s suffering and each individual’s shortcomings. As a grieving mother, she is no Pollyanna. By the same token, Christ never disappoints Mary in her singularity of purpose. He taught her the real meaning of the Christian virtue of hope, and we are very fortunate to have his best pupil as our instructor.

Spiritually speaking, what is the cash value of our education in the school of Mary? What can we apply from the meditation of the Rosary to our daily lives? One key is to see the new understanding of contemplation and action proposed by both Paul VI and John Paul II. Paul VI said that the Rosary without contemplation is a body without a soul, a mechanical repetition of formulas without any real rhythm or lingering pace (12). John Paul II urges us to make of the Rosary “a form of christocentric contemplation” (ibid.). This not only means placing Christ at the center but also seeking to find the point where the rhythm of the Rosary converges with the rhythm of each day of the week (38).


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Now with a total of twenty mysteries, we can also rededicate ourselves to hearing the Word of God in the Rosary. Listening to the Word of God is not a matter of recalling information but of allowing God to speak (30). Real silence is increasingly difficult to achieve today given our bombardment by the din of the mass media, yet such a stance is, ironically, a key to reciting the Rosary (31). The Pope recommends that we pause after listening to the Word of God to focus on the particular mystery. He also suggests that we try to imagine in vivid detail the place where Jesus walked and preached (29). God became incarnate so that we could see his human features. Do not treat these scriptural scenes as mere theological concepts or simple goads to moral reform. Let God tell his side of the story for a change.

CONTEMPLATING CHRIST AS “THE FRUIT OF HER WOMB, JESUS”

Reciting the *Hail Mary* takes up most of the Rosary, and “the fruit of her womb, Jesus” is at the very center of the *Hail Mary* (33). The Pope draws our attention to the centrality of the name of Jesus in the middle of the whole devotion. The name of Jesus is a historical fact and a Jewish legacy, for it was given by Mary and Joseph at his circumcision and literally means “Yahweh saves.” Here we begin to see how a meditation on words can unlock a hidden sacred mystery.

The first part of the Rosary (“Hail Mary, full of grace…”) is drawn from the words spoken to Mary by the angel Gabriel and Elizabeth and represents a common heritage of Western and Eastern Christianity. Its focus is on the wonder accomplished in the womb of the Virgin (33). Christ is God’s newest marvel of creation. The second part (“Holy Mary, Mother of God…”) was added by the medieval Western Church. Here we underscore Mary’s place in the drama of salvation. She is not only *theotokos* but also our maternal intercessor before Christ (*ibid.*).

“Jesus” is the last word on the incarnation and the foreword to the Virgin’s intercession. His name is “a hinge” that joins the two parts (33). Following the Pope’s suggestions, we can also say that repeating the name of Jesus has two functions. First, we are blessing the name of our Savior. As it says in the Scriptures: "There is no salvation in anyone else, for there is no other name in the whole world given to men by which we are to be saved" (Acts 4:12). Second, repeating his name helps to concentrate our meditation. Concentration is here meant not just in a psychological but in a theological sense. The repetition of the name “facilitates the process of assimilation to the mystery of Christ” (30). It is, the Pope writes, as if the Blessed Mother herself were asking us to meditate resolutely on the name as a way of entering more deeply into the life of Christ (*ibid.*).
Many people today still wonder whether to really is a point to so much repetitiousness. They ask: "Why not compose our own prayers to Jesus and Mary?" The letter by no means rejects new prayers. In fact, the Pope asks the People of God to consider new, more scripturally-based prayers to follow the trinitarian doxology ("Glory be..., etc.") at the end of each decade. He suggests that we follow the doxology with "a prayer for the fruits specific to that particular mystery. In this way the Rosary would better express its connection to the Christian life" (35). These new thoughts could supplement the hymn from the Roman Missal that asks that we may imitate what these mysteries contain and obtain what they promise.

On the other hand, the Pope by no means downplays repetitiousness. It can be a deeply spiritual act. Rather than a mechanical artifice, he considers the recitation of the prayers as a living work of art. Considered in its totality, the repetition of the Hail Mary represents "an unceasing praise of Christ, the warp on which is woven the contemplation of the mysteries" (18). (Recall the image of weaving the body of Christ with which I began.) To be sure, repetition even when performed spiritually also maintains an authentic psychological dimension. If we truly believe that these prayers allow us to enter into a new relationship with Jesus and Mary, then repetitiousness is a dynamic proper to love itself. Peter was asked by the Lord three times whether he loved him (Jn 21:15-17). When we really love someone, it is not too much to ask and receive a verbal confirmation from time to time (26).

The Pope wants to reunite the spiritual traditions of Eastern and Western Christianity. He asks whether the meditation of the Rosary could be paralleled with the Eastern practice of repeating the Jesus prayer, "Lord Jesus Christ, Son of God, have mercy on me, a sinner." (27). There is a rich spiritual heritage associated with the Jesus prayer that focuses on the rhythms of breathing. But the meditation of the Jesus prayer is also a form of union with God. In the letter to the Colossians, St. Paul wrote: "The fruit of the Spirit is love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, gentleness, goodness, faithfulness, self-control; against such things there is no law" (Gal 5:22-23). "The life of the Spirit is to be filled with the fruit of the Spirit, which is love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, gentleness, goodness, faithfulness, self-control" (Gal 5:22-23). This brings me to a second point about the wider significance of the letter. In the same passage in which the Pope recalls his own devotion to the prayer, he refers to the present letter as a "prayer-commentary on the last chapter of the Vatican II Constitution [on the Church]." This

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fascinating remark ties the letter to a reform that began over forty years ago and to the conciliar vision of the church as the people of God. According to the chapter in question, the people are being led on a pilgrimage by the Mother of God to final communion with the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit. The legacy of Vatican II is likewise present when the Pope says that “if properly revitalized, the Rosary is an aid and certainly not a hindrance to ecumenism” (4).

But how can the Rosary really be “an aid” to Christian unity? Even if we take into account the Pope’s overture to the Christian East, the remark about ecumenism seems startling. Protestants have often downplayed and condemned private devotions. Many object to Marian devotions on the grounds that Christian prayer should not be directed to someone other than the Father, Son, or Holy Spirit.21 Here a little bit of history regarding the Pope’s reference to the Council is quite elucidating. The last chapter of the Council’s Constitution on the Church deals with Mary. As a matter of fact, the inclusion of this chapter in the Constitution on the Church was approved by a very narrow margin at the Council (1,114-1,074). This dramatic moment was then heralded as a pivotal moment of the Council and a cause for celebration in the worldwide ecumenical movement.22

The controversy played itself out as follows. Some argued for a separate decree on Mary. They felt that this was the only way to pay due reverence to the blessed Mother. Another group was concerned about what theologians such as Hans Urs von Balthasar later termed “Marian maximalism.” The church does not teach that Mary is a fourth person of the Trinity, they said. They argued that Mary had to be included as part of the renewed vision of the church in order to circumvent the charge that Catholics took the intercession of the Mother of God as a supplement to the Trinity. The debate was heated, and reasonable arguments were made on both sides. In the end, the Council Fathers gave new life to the “Marian profile” of the church23 without allowing for any undue confusion between Mary’s “subordinate” mediation and the divine grace of the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit.24

All of this suggests that *Rosarium Virginis Mariae* was directly inspired by the Council’s decisive option for ecumenism and can today be a

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21. Cf. Stefan Tobler, “Path to Contemplation: an Ecumenical Rosary,” *Living City* 42,1 (January 2003), p. 11. On the addressee of the *Hail Mary*, see RVM 26: “although the repeated *Hail Mary* is addressed directly to Mary, it is to Jesus that the act of love is ultimately directed, with her and through her.”


23. The Marian profile has been very important to eclesial movements. For a detailed exposition of its history and theology, see Brendan Leahy, *The Marian Profile in the Ecclesiology of Hans Urs von Balthasar* (New York: New City Press, 2000).

Protestants are right to remind Catholics that Jesus himself calls us to see the Mother of God as a vehicle to listening to his Word. Springboard for Christian unity, Chiara Lubich, the founder of the Catholic lay movement known as Focolare, confirms this in referring to Mary of the Rosary as “all word of God.” Likewise, the Anglican Callan Slipper has highlighted some key points of convergence between Protestantism and Catholicism on the role of Mary. Mary’s “Yes” to God, he says, discloses “a self-emptying, a silence, a total openness to the divine that makes me ready to be molded by the word of God and his will.” Protestants are right to remind Catholics that Jesus himself calls us to see the Mother of God as a vehicle to listening to his Word. As Christians we are called to the most radical form of receptivity to what God says, does, and requires of us. If we accept this challenge, then we will be truly open to living the gospel in a Marian key. Or in Slipper’s felicitous phrase, we are willing to let Jesus slowly carve the figure of Mary into us.

CONCLUSION

“Mary lives only in Christ and for Christ” (15). She is a model par excellence of lay sanctity, but she is for Catholics also more than a model. Assumed into heaven, she ardently promotes renewal in the church and the spreading of the gospel. She crowns the communion of saints and gives all Christians a preview of their journey to God. Saying the Rosary is a surprisingly rich form of Christian contemplation. The Pope’s letter asks us to discover joy in the contemplative rhythms of prayer. According to Piero Coda, contemplation is not a shelter that allows us to escape from the world. To meet Christ, we must go outside of ourselves. “To contemplate,” Coda says, “is to mirror ourselves in the one whom we are contemplating, Jesus, in order then to be able to mirror him in ourselves.”

30. One must be careful not to confuse this “more” with an apotheosis of Mary. The “more” represents rather a unique quality of Mary’s steadfast and maternal love, one that enables her dialogue with God on behalf of the Church entrusted to her by Christ to continue even in heaven.
At the recent Marian congress at Castel Gandolfo outside of Rome, Chiara Lubich spoke about the decision of the founders of Focolare to adopt the name Opera di Maria, the work of Mary. At first they had only a dim recognition of its significance, but with time the group became more fully immersed in their new identity. Focolare became, as it were, clothed in the Virgin's protective mantle. Far from a refuge, the Marian pact became a challenge to live each moment with Jesus in their midst. The practice of reciting the Rosary suddenly transformed itself into a way of life and a form of communion. They became beads of a living Rosary.

My final thought concerns the idea of living beads. Most rosaries have a cross or a crucifix. This is not decorative but the source of the chain's true strength. In a genuine spirituality of communion, Jesus' abandonment for our sake is our strongest link. Likewise, his hopeful mother at the foot of the cross is our greatest advocate. In Jesus' name, we ask, "Holy Mary, Mother of God, pray for us now and at the hour of our death."