

A Personal Relationship with Jesus and Mary

By Brother Michael

General Pamphlet No.gen0003 (1992)

CARITAS - VERITAS

J & M

Based on a talk given by Brother Michael in a retreat at Parkes, N.S.W. in 1992.

The relationship we have with Jesus and Mary is a love relationship. Such a relationship means a decision and commitment on our part to the other person, and the other person to us. This commitment usually needs to be supported by good communication and positive feelings. But, if love was primarily a feeling, we would all suffer from the 'yo-yo syndrome' - as our feelings went up and down so would our love for the other person. In fact, love is more than an emotion. For example, someone who feels very angry with a child will still risk his life to save that child from injury. Love lies in the will rather than in the emotions.

Our relationship with Jesus and Mary relies on two things, one is our understanding of them as people, and the other is our interaction with them in conversation and in various other ways. If we approach Jesus and Mary in love we can rely on their response being one of loving affection towards us. We don't have to worry about the problem that many people have, of deciding what the other person really thinks and feels about us. In human love there is often a doubt because people can say that they love you, they can treat you lovingly, but you still can't read their minds and hearts. The minds and hearts of Jesus and Mary remain constantly open to us.

The relationship between Jesus and Mary and ourselves may develop in unexpected ways. We have a tendency to want an 'instant coffee recipe' for a relationship with Jesus or with Mary. For example, if we go to eight talks or prayer meetings, at the end of it, like instant coffee, we want to have this instant relationship with Jesus or with Mary. Jesus and Mary are not like trained circus animals to perform whenever we say jump. They know what is best for us. If some of the prayers we offer to Jesus and Mary remain unanswered, it is because granting our prayers would in some way result in harm to us. Jesus and Mary always know what is in our best interests. Human beings usually work to prevent suffering and difficulty in the lives of those that they love. Yet suffering and difficulty can be vitally important in our personal growth and in the growth of our relationships with other people.

Shared suffering and difficulties bind us to other people, That is one reason why God does not remove all suffering. If we are not careful our love can be mercenary. We have a tendency to love other people and then want them to repay us by making us feel good. There is more love of ourselves than love of the other person in such an attitude. I am going to have a look separately at the personalities of Jesus and Mary as shown in their lives on earth. In the section on relationship with Mary I'll develop something of our relationship with her, now that she is living in a life beyond ours. In the case of Jesus, his life beyond ours is the life of God as well as man.

We come to the Scriptures for our relationship with Jesus and Mary. I believe we have to remove a great deal of falsification of their personalities, and their lives on earth, as conceived in the minds of

many Christians. In many ways Christian art and Christian belief have become middle-class and glossy. The 'gentle Jesus meek and mild' syndrome has very little resemblance to the Jesus of history or the Jesus of faith.

JESUS THE CHRIST, OF NAZARETH, SON OF GOD AND SAVIOUR

Jesus Himself came from what we might call a depressed area of Galilee, in an outpost of the Roman Empire, which had some strategic but not a great deal of other importance. It was not exactly a plum for the Roman Governor or other Roman officials who were posted there, and they often resided in the Roman city of Caesarea rather than in Jerusalem. Jesus was the son of a carpenter which in good times meant that they would have been fairly prosperous. But the standards of His day were much poorer than anything most of us have known. We can see from the reaction to Jesus when he returned to Galilee during His public ministry that He had not stood out from the crowd during His earlier life there. Their reaction was "This is the carpenter's son surely, where does he get this knowledge from". If He was the perfectly moulded person, the epitome of male beauty, as some would like to imagine Him, the Jews at the time certainly didn't seem to notice it much. Nor did He come across as a misunderstood genius. He was simply the carpenter's son and they all knew Him and who He was.

And yet, He was obviously a charismatic personality because men of various walks of life left everything and followed Him. There were other charismatic personalities in the Palestine of Jesus' day, and they and their followers frequently ended on Roman crosses during the various rebellions and uprisings that occurred. It is significant that the Christians were the ones who ended up on crosses because they challenged the religion, not the military power, of Rome. Emperor Worship gave stability to the Roman Empire and kept the citizens subservient to the State.

Jesus' teaching on love, and goodness, brotherhood and truth, is profound. Most people have admired it. So we have atheists, agnostics, Hindus, Buddhists, Baptists, Catholics, and others, all acknowledging that Jesus' teaching is exceptional and sublime, and worthy of great human respect. But only a minority (and in theory this means every sincere Catholic and Christian) have gone beyond this to see in Jesus, not only the carpenter, but also the Son of God.

If we follow His life through we see a great strength of character and beauty and we are left to conclude at His death one of three things - Either He was crazy, or He was deceiving people, or He was genuine. As we read the accounts of His arrest, trial and death we see the enormous suffering Jesus went through for the truth that He was the Son of God. Simply by changing His testimony He would have probably saved His life. If He admitted to being a fraud He would have been of little danger to the Jewish authorities or the Romans. But He did not do so.

The followers of Jesus were, on the whole, a reasonably hopeless lot. A modern personality scan done on the Twelve Apostles indicates that the only one with potential was Judas Iscariot, who was seen to be somewhat enterprising and possessing of potential business skills. The rest, would not be seen to excel in our modern world.

The middle class, who have in a certain sense hijacked the Church, present us with a painted glossy Messiah, by reading back from the glorified Jesus to the earthly one, and by projecting their own middle-class values into the Jesus of history. But the Jesus of history was seen by most of His contemporaries as a rabble-rousing tradesman's son, an itinerant preacher, who never had an important job or held high office, who was pretentious, puffed up, and deluded. He had been a

refugee in Egypt. He mixed among the lowly and despised classes and was soundly condemned by the respectable people of His time for doing so.

It would be most interesting to see what would happen if Jesus the carpenter turned up amidst a Sunday congregation at any of the Christian Churches. Would He measure up to the expectations of those who today see themselves as His followers, or would He be a disappointment? I think for the most part He would be a disappointment to so many since their expectations are not rooted in the actuality of who Jesus really was. He was, after all, a disappointment to most of the Jews of His time. The motives of the high priests and the other authorities were questionable but the ordinary people were devout enough. The well intentioned self-righteous people of His day were probably as well intentioned and as genuine as respectable self-righteous people are in any age. If we met Jesus of Nazareth what would we expect? Each of us would find our own answers through reading and reflection on the New Testament. But I suggest that we try to clear our minds from the effect of church art which is often designed to be pleasing to the eye. I don't think there was a great deal of pleasantness in the life of Jesus of Nazareth. I think He had a very hard life and certainly a very unpleasant death.

The imagination is a very weak tool of the mind. For example, it is quite one thing to imagine one's leg being sawn off without an anaesthetic, it is another thing to watch a movie of someone else's leg being sawn off without an anaesthetic, it is quite another thing again to have one's own leg sawn off without an anaesthetic. So when we try to look at Jesus of Nazareth we have to look for equivalent experiences in our own lives and pray for the grace of God to enlighten us as to what He was like when the people of His time met Him. He is the same Jesus of Nazareth now as He was then. He is the same type of person. After all, one purpose of the incarnation was to reveal in human terms the nature of the Deity. We should be able to see in Jesus of Nazareth, not only the Jesus of history, but the Jesus who occupies pride of place in our spiritual lives. When thinking of the crucifixion it's much better to think of an operation, a nervous breakdown, childbirth or other pain that we have suffered. We should try to identify with the pain of Jesus rather than look at pictures, because you can only understand another person's experience by comparing the same emotions as you have experienced. We can also ask God to give us infused insight and understanding.

The Christ of the Scriptures:

He came from Nazareth, a village in Galilee, which was one of the most backward and despised districts of Palestine (Jn. 1:45-46). He was a carpenter's son (Mk. 6:3). He was not considered learned or important by his fellow townsmen (Mk. 6:1-2). People were even surprised he could read (Jn. 7:15). Yet this poor tradesman had great power over the human heart. He called men and they came, leaving everything to follow him (Mt. 4:18-20; Mt. 9:9 etc.). He was a great teacher who used simple language and illustrations (e.g. Mt. 13:24-30; Mt. 13:44-46; Mt. 18:23-35, etc.).

By parables, such as the good Samaritan and the prodigal son, he fixed his doctrine of love in the hearts of the most uneducated of his hearers (Lk. 10:29-37, Lk. 15:11-32). His teaching made such an impression on many that they followed him for several days at a time with little or no food (Mt. 15:32-39). He taught with authority (Mt. 7:28-29). Even his enemies were surprised at the power of his personality (Jn. 7:40-48). Often his enemies tried to trick him into saying something that would be used against him but he was able to baffle them with his wisdom (Mt. 12:22-28; Lk. 13:10-17). He was courageous and prepared to suffer for the truth of his teaching. Even though he was only a poor tradesman he was not afraid to oppose the proud and powerful Pharisees and to expose their

hypocrisy, avarice, and hardness of heart in powerful language (Mt. 23:1-36; 16:1-4). Yet he knew what it was to suffer from terror at the knowledge of what it would cost him to follow God's will (Mt. 26:38-44; Lk. 22:41-44).

Even when confronted with death as a result of his teaching he made no attempt to lie to save himself - in fact he claimed that the whole purpose of his life had been to bear witness to the truth (Jn. 18:33-38). He made no appeal, no apology, no retraction of his doctrine. When scourged he made no plea for mercy. When confronted with false witnesses he did not compromise his dignity by arguing with them about their obviously false testimony. Yet when asked to condemn himself by making a statement of his teaching that would obviously be used against him he did so out of respect for the truth (Mt. 26:57-66).

He was no self-seeker or lover of money. He associated with the poor and despised even though this made him many enemies among the rich (Mt. 9:10-13; Mt. 19:23-26). He did not even have enough money to support himself and his disciples without help (Lk. 8:1-3). Yet the Gospels make it clear that his poverty was not due to laziness but to a matter of principle.

He was firm but not obstinate. He refused to sacrifice principle to please the rich young ruler (Mt. 19:16-22), yet he granted the request of the Syro-Phoenician woman, because of her humility and perseverance, even though he was not at first disposed to do so (Mk. 7:24-30).

He was gentle, courteous and humble. A man of loving heart and attractive personality, he was courteous to the Pharisee, Nicodemus, because he came to him with the right intention (Jn. 3:1-21). He taught his followers to be humble and gentle (Mt. 5:1-10; Mt. 20:24-28). He practised these virtues himself (Jn. 13:1-16; 8:1-11; Lk. 7:11-17). He taught love of God and neighbour as the highest duties of men (Mk. 12:29-31).

Yet he was not weak. He had a majesty about him that sometimes filled his followers with awe (Lk. 9:43-45). He had miraculous powers (Mk. 3:7-12). At times he could do things that appeared unnecessarily cruel (Lk. 2:41-50). He could even be angry enough to be violent when he felt it was justified (Jn. 2:13-22). Yet he could weep at the death of a friend (Jn. 11:32-35). In fact he was a man like us in all things, sin alone excepted (Heb. 4:14-16).

He was a man of prayer and all that he achieved was founded on prayer (Heb. 5:7). Even though he experienced many sorrows and great suffering he was a man whose thought was primarily for God and others. Even on the cross he prayed that God would forgive his murderers (Lk. 23:33-34). He found time to give his mother into John's keeping and to assure the repentant thief of God's mercy (Jn. 19:25-27; Lk. 23:39-43). Finally he is a man who demands total dedication from his followers (Rev. 3 : 14-22).

(All references are to: THE JERUSALEM BIBLE).

THE VIRGIN MARY

As to the personality of the Virgin Mary I think we should remember that she was a Jewish mother and housewife. She was also a refugee and knew what it was like to be without a country and a home. Boat people can relate to this aspect of the Virgin's life, and that of Jesus, better than we native-born Australians who are protected from this sort of experience in its truly raw form. As a housewife, it is likely that she had perhaps three homespun dresses. One would imagine that in the Nazareth of her day there would have been a lot of sickness and suffering. The infant mortality rate was high.

One does not imagine the Virgin Mary of history to be dressed in tinsel and silk; homespun and baby's vomit would be closer to the truth. Surely it would be natural for someone, who was chosen to be the Mother of God, to be the best of Mothers. Whenever a mother's skill was needed by the people of Nazareth I'm sure the Virgin Mary would have been one to volunteer her services. A modern analogy could be someone along the lines of Mother Teresa of Calcutta, except for one thing, the blessed Virgin Mary was never recognized in her lifetime. So if you imagine a little known nun of the order that Mother Teresa has founded working in the home of the dying, among the sick, the people with vomiting, diarrhoea, dying of disease, inadequate medication and so forth, we get a much better picture of the sort of life that the Virgin Mary probably led.

We don't see too many middle-class comforts in the earthly life of the Blessed Virgin Mary. She did not stand out. When Jesus returned to Nazareth the people, and Jesus' relatives, did not say "Of course He is the Son of God. We all know Mary, with a mother like that he has to be Divine". In those days it was the responsibility of the family to take charge and look after lunatics, and the response of Jesus' relatives, when He was in town, was to try to stop Him because they thought he was mad. So we must be very cautious about accepting the very questionable material sometimes presented to us as to what the Blessed Virgin Mary was like. It is valid to accept some of the statues and devotions as representing the Virgin Mary if we are very clear, in our own minds, that they represent the Mary of the Assumption and Coronation. It is the Mary of glory read back into the Mary of history that causes problems.

The glory of both Jesus and Mary was obviously hidden from a vast majority of the people of their time, and I don't think that they were miraculously struck blind. The survival of Christianity is riot explained by how effective Jesus was in His life and public ministry. The reason we know Christianity to be true is that Jesus was, in human terms, a failure. It is impossible to explain the rise of Christianity without the resurrection of Jesus Christ. The pathetic group of apostles, who fled on Good Friday, could not become the men who stormed Jerusalem with faith after Easter Sunday and Pentecost if they were not absolutely certain that Jesus was risen from the dead.

When we relate to Mary we must keep in mind not just her heavenly glory but her earthly life, and we must not make a respectable middle-class assessment of the nature of the life of the Virgin Mary. That is why it is often the poor and ordinary people who have the most beautiful Marian devotion. Over the years I have seen many people, particularly mothers who have to cope with many children and non-believing husbands, overcoming difficulties by their love of God, their love of Jesus, and also a simple and tender and beautiful appreciation of the nature of the Virgin Mary. Mary is a person to whom the growing number of poor people in our own society, the dispossessed, the unemployed, the mentally ill, and the chronic invalids, can easily relate. They can see Mary as having been one of them, a person in need, a person who had to struggle through life, a person who had to meet with many difficulties, who felt rejection and ridicule because of her supposedly lunatic son, and so forth. This should encourage us because it gives us an ability to relate to the Virgin Mary, to understand her tenderness, her compassion, her ability to see us as we really are.

That's why she is the hope of the hopeless, the refuge of sinners, the comforter of the afflicted, the health of the sick, and, after Jesus, the person who brings help and relief to suffering mankind, because that was her role as the Virgin of Nazareth.

I said earlier that I am not going to develop the theme of Jesus in His Glorified state. But I will have a brief look at something of the spiritual dimension of the Virgin Mary in the modern world. The

first thing that we should look at is the essential principle behind Marian devotion. Here it is: in order to have a complete relationship with Jesus we must have a complete relationship with His entire family. This includes His family in Heaven, the saints; His family in purgatory, the Church suffering; and His family on earth, which hopefully includes all of us. If one meets Jesus first, as I did, it is only natural that He leads us to meet other members of His family, and especially His mother, who is the human being closest to Him. It is Jesus who gave me devotion to Mary.

Jesus can be met by people in many ways; for example, people might read the Bible or another book, someone might give them a religious medal, they may come to know a Catholic friend or a Catholic family, they ' may come across some form of devotion to Mary or one of the saints, or any one of a dozen ways that ultimately lead to faith in Jesus. But what we now see is that it is not so much that one leads to another but the two things tend to interact and grow. As one's faith in Jesus grows so does one's awareness of Mary and the other members of Jesus' family. Similarly, as one's awareness of Mary, the saints, angels, holy souls and one's fellow Christians grows, so does our love for Jesus. Love is one of those things that just grows and grows as long as it is nourished. Mary is the most beautiful of all human beings after Jesus Himself. We are naturally drawn to love her deeply. In former times the faithful imagined Mary handing on their requests and prayers to Jesus. Nowadays we can picture ourselves, perhaps, sitting in a three person conversation, with Jesus, Mary and ourselves participating within that conversation, and the conversation building up the relationships between us and Jesus, and us and Mary. The relationship between Jesus and Mary is of course complete. We can go to Jesus, the Messiah and the Son of God, via all sorts of means, but after that we grow by association with His family in which Mary has a unique place.

Therefore, I think we need to have a closer look at what Marian devotion means to the people of our own time in what is, a rather rotten, but nevertheless democratic, western welfare state. We bring with us all the enlightenment, prejudice and ignorance that we have gathered by our willing, and to some extent enforced, participation in it. So I suggest this to you for your reflection.

It is important to realize that Mary is now beyond death and she is here in this room. She is standing beside you as you read. She, like Jesus, the Father, the Holy Spirit, the angels and the saints, who are present also, is, of course, invisible to the naked eye. But her presence is available to the eye of faith. So true Marian devotion lies in a love relationship with the Virgin Mary in whatever way that works for each of us as the person that we are. Marian devotion will therefore differ from person to person depending on the experiences, personality, and the way of expression of each individual. Cultural differences are especially important and must be respected. Mary herself, of course, does not differ but our way of relating to her differs. Most Catholics, Orthodox, Anglo-Catholics, and some High Church Lutherans, Anglicans, and such-like, accept that we can have prayer dialogue with all those who are in Heaven. Most other Christians accept the possibility of dialogue prayer with Jesus and the Trinity only. This is an essential and basic difference between these two groups of Christians. The evidence of history and personal experience has convinced me that the Catholic view is the truth.

Just as the prophets and holy people in the Bible obtained many spiritual and material blessings by their prayers, so our conversations with Mary obtain for us a deeper love for Jesus and many graces and blessings in our lives today.

Sometimes it is feared that devotion to Mary in the form of the rosary, scapulars, medals, pictures, and processions may be excessive. However, there is little room in Anglo-Saxon Catholicism as I

have seen it, regrettably, for any show of genuine warm devotion to Jesus. There are all too few opportunities for expressing devotion to Jesus either individually or as part of a group. This largely intellectual and elitist approach to devotion to Jesus does not attract the bulk of the people. In this type of atmosphere any form of devotion to Mary that involves the whole of the person, especially as a member of a group, can appear excessive. However, the truth is that Marian devotion needs to be renewed and intensified and made fully human, and that devotion to Jesus needs to be renewed and increased beyond the realms of anything that we can as yet imagine. Thus a true balance will be achieved.

In conclusion, I'd like to have a brief look at the way in which God has made special use of Our Lady in these latter times through various apparitions which have been approved by the Church. I would like to say from the outset that I think chasing apparitions is a somewhat hazardous thing to do. It tends to involve people in a great deal of argument and confusion. Surrounding any unusual phenomena that gains public notice there is always contention, disagreement, conflicting reports, and so forth. It is always best to limit oneself only to what has been officially and formally sanctioned by Holy Mother Church. The Mother of God Brothers, as a Society, trying to live in an authentic Catholic spirit, officially promotes only five of the major Marian apparitions. This is in no way to cast doubt on any of the others which have received formal and official credence from the Teaching Authority of the Catholic Church.

They are:

1. The appearance of Our Lady to St. Simon Stock who was given the Brown Scapular by Our Lady. The scapular is a sign of consecration to Mary and spiritual membership of the Carmelite order. Each Mother of God Brother is required to wear the Brown Scapular or its medal.
2. The apparitions in 1531 of Our Lady of Guadalupe in the Americas resulting in a miraculous full-length picture/painting. Our interest in this apparition centres on the fact
 - (a) that it appears to be the only authentic portrait of Mary ever produced, but more importantly,
 - (b) the picture contains a great deal of symbolism which the native Indians understood and which caused an increasing stream of conversions to Catholicism, until the number gained was in the millions. This occurred at a time when the Church was having great difficulty in gaining new members of the family of faith in Central and South America because of the cruelty and greed of the Spanish and Portuguese conquerors.
3. In 1830 St. Catherine Laboure had the Miraculous Medal revealed to her, a devotion that we promote. The very fact that it has become known as the Miraculous Medal, when its official name is the Medal of the Immaculate Conception, shows what has happened since this apparition. The out-pouring of graces has been incredible and many people have turned back to God. Therefore it is of special interest to our Society and Community which are dedicated to evangelisation and a special devotion to the Virgin Mary. No aid to Marian devotion, including the Miraculous Medal, should be distributed without some form of adequate explanation accompanying it.
4. In 1856 Our Lady appeared to Bernadette at Lourdes where she invites us to take the sick. This is a very appropriate devotion for a Society such as ours that includes in its membership a reasonable number of sick and handicapped people.
5. Finally in 1917 the apparitions of Our Lady at Fatima in Portugal. The miracle of the sun is the only major public miracle that was foretold in advance for a set time and place. It was seen by

70,000 people (or more), a reasonable number of whom were nonbelievers. Portugal was in fact under a somewhat anti-Catholic government at that time, and there was fierce anti-Catholic propaganda in the major cities. Yet even the anti-Catholic papers had to print that an exceptional phenomenon, which could not be scientifically explained, had taken place in the presence of 70,000 people. In the years that followed, Portugal was largely won back for the Faith. We promote the Fatima message because of its evangelical call to prayer, repentance and sacrificial love, and because God has worked such a great sign 'so that all may believe'.

Let me make this point very clear. As good Catholics we desire to be at one with the mind of Christ and therefore at one with the mind of the Church He established. Thus we can make the following statement. No Mother of God Brother, or anyone officially representing the Mother of God Brothers, may promote any apparitions not fully approved by the Church; nor can anyone claim that the Mother of God Brothers officially promote any apparitions, other than the five mentioned above.

Further it should go without saying, but it will be said in any case because of the difficult times in which we live, no action of the Mother of God Brothers should appear to weaken the absolutely central part that Christ plays in Catholicism. Christ is the source from which all grace flows. It can never be acceptable to Mary when someone seems to exalt her above her Divine son. Jesus.

REFERENCES:

The Jerusalem Bible The Complete Works of St. Teresa of Avila The Complete Works of St. John of the Cross The Autobiography of St. Therese of Lisieux The Collected Letters of St. Therese of Lisieux The Springs of Carmel (An Introduction to Carmelite Spirituality) by Peter Slattery, St. Paul Publications, 60-70 Broughton Rd., Homebush, N.S.W. 2140 [P.O. Box 906 Strathfield, N.S.W. 2135] (I found this book extremely useful in the preparation of some of my Retreat talks. I find it very inspiring. I suggest you consider buying your own copy).

For further information contact:

The Mother of God Brothers Guadalupe House, 30 Bottlebrush Street. Thurgoona. N.S.W. 2640, Australia Phone: (02) 6043 1001
