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COMMUNION IN THE WORD THROUGH MARY*

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The 50th International Eucharistic Congress has been providing us with a wealth of reflection on the Eucharist: Communion with Christ and with one another. Having explored communion in baptism, in marriage and family, in the priestly ministry, in reconciliation and in suffering and healing, we now turn to communion in the Word through Mary. Allow me to develop this fascinating theme in two parts. In the first section I will dwell on communion in the Word of God, and in the second I will meditate on Mary's experience of communion in the Word as a model for the Church.

Part I: Communion in the Word of God

How will we approach this topic? It might help to turn to ordinary human experience. One common way of establishing a connection with another human being is through conversation or dialogue. This occurs so often that we seldom notice its significance. Take a person who sees a good movie, excitedly shares it with a friend, who in turn goes to the cinema to watch it due to the friend's satisfying experience.

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Then they spend hours talking about the film, digressing many times to the stories of their lives. Or take another person whose marriage is falling apart, calls up a friend who becomes equally distressed after listening intently. Then they spend hours talking about the sorrows of life, finding hope in each other's presence. We now see that human communion ordinarily happens when someone begins to tell a story to another person who listens, enters the experience, and makes it one's own. In the exchange that follows, their roles shift and alternate: the one who narrates also listens, the one who listens spontaneously narrates. Two persons and their unique worlds meet in a unity that goes beyond them.

This simple process called communion in the word is at the heart of the mystery and mission of the Church. St. John vividly portrays it in his first letter (1:1–4):

> What was from the beginning, what we have heard, what we have seen with our eyes, what we looked upon and touched with our hands concerns the Word of life—for the life was made visible; we have seen it and testify to it and proclaim to you the eternal life that was with the Father and was made visible to us —what we have seen and heard we proclaim now to you, so that you too may have communion with us; for our communion is with the Father and with His Son, Jesus Christ. We are writing this so that our joy may be complete.

Human communion. What St. John is describing is similar to the ordinary experiences of communion between two or more human beings we mentioned earlier. But St. John's account involves a special person, called an apostle who proclaims a special word to a listener. Their converse blossoms into communion with each other, which in reality is their communion with the Father and with Jesus Christ, the Word made visible in the flesh. What a great mystery unfolding in a quite ordinary human experience! Let us delve deeper into this beautiful text.

What word does the apostle share with his listener? It is the Word of life, present with the Father and made visible. The word that the apostle proclaims is Jesus Christ, the Word made flesh. Simply put, the apostle's word is Jesus Christ. We can see it plainly in the New Testament. After Pentecost, Peter proclaimed to his hearers the person of Jesus the Nazorean sent by God, crucified but whom God raised

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from the dead, making him Lord and Messiah (Acts 2:22–24, 36). Peter declared that salvation comes to us in the name of Jesus (Acts 4:12). But let us not forget that Peter was able to proclaim Jesus because he had heard, seen and touched Jesus.

Another great apostle, Paul tirelessly spoke of nothing but Jesus Christ. Not being a member of the Twelve, he nevertheless was graced by a special revelation from the Risen Lord that changed his life radically (Acts 9:1–19). But he received his knowledge about the earthly life and ministry of Jesus from others who had spoken to him about Jesus. In 1 Corinthians, he said, "For I handed on to you as of first importance what I also received" (1 Cor. 15:3). His encounter with the living Lord and the story of Jesus transmitted to him have equipped him to proclaim Him as the Messiah and Lord.

In a nutshell, the apostle proclaims the person of Jesus Christ, the story of his ministry, preaching and healing centred on the Reign of God. He narrates how people rejected and crucified Him and how God raised Him from death. At His resurrection, Jesus was revealed as the Anointed One of God, indeed, the divine Son of God who exercises full dominion over the world and its future. Whether it is Peter, Paul, Stephen, Philip or Mary of Magdala, the joyful story told is that of Jesus Christ and the destiny of the world in Him who is Divine Saviour and Messiah.

We must note that the apostle renders an objective account concerning Jesus. But he can hand on facts about Jesus because he has experienced Him personally. He has heard, seen, looked upon and touched Jesus. Thus an apostle's familiarity with Jesus enables him to be the source of a historical proclamation about Him. Here the objective and the subjective, the factual and the personal meet. Those who have listened to Jesus can tell this story to others in a credible way. Then their listeners accept Jesus into their dreams, joys, pains, hopes, frustrations, questions and wisdoms. They bring all these that comprise their worlds as they listen towards communion.

You might say, "Well and good for the original companions of Jesus. They saw Him firsthand. But how can we who are separated from Jesus by centuries talk meaningfully about Him?" Let us not

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forget that Jesus is alive. He is truly raised from the dead! He is with us now. He rules the world. He continues to visit the homes of many Marthas and Marys of our time to enjoy a restful meal. He continues to weep at our tombs the way he did at the tomb of Lazarus his friend. He continues to quietly call on the Zacchaeuses of our age to pay back what they have stolen. He continues to have compassion for widows who carry their children to the grave. He continues to see the hungry crowds and asks us to feed them with our five loaves and two fish. He continues to welcome the weary and heavy burdened to find rest in Him. He continues to cry out to God with the suffering victims, "My God, my God why have you forsaken me?" My brothers and sisters, please do not say we have not seen, heard, looked upon and touched Jesus. Yes, we have. If only we could listen to Him more attentively, we will have stories of Jesus to tell.

Communion with Christ and the Father. St. John claims that the human communion between the messenger and listener centred on the Word of life is not merely a human transaction. It is at the same time their communion with Jesus Christ and with the Father. In other words, this quite ordinary human togetherness has a transcendent dimension.

We already said that the word proclaimed by the apostle is not only a historical fact that could be verified by scientific methods but also an experience of the mystery of the Word of God made flesh and who now lives eternally with the Father. Where two or three are in communion with each other on account of Jesus, He is in their midst. This is not just a sociological fact. We believe that this communion with Christ is the action of the Holy Spirit who teaches and reminds us of all that Jesus taught (John 14:26). The same Holy Spirit enables us to confess "Jesus is Lord" (1 Cor. 12:3). The Spirit "assimilates" us with Jesus Christ so that as children in the Son we can also cry out "Abba, Father" (Romans 8:14–15). Now it is clear that communion with Jesus in the Holy Spirit brings about communion with the Father. Jesus reveals the Father to us so that whoever sees Him sees the Father also (John 8:9). As the Way (John 14:6), Jesus gives us access to the Father (Ephesians 2:18) and to the Father's house where he prepares a place for us (John 14:2–3).

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What a marvellous communion in the Word that gives us weak and sinful human beings a participation in the eternal communion of the Father, Son and Holy Spirit! This is the mystery of the Church celebrated in the Eucharist where the Word proclaimed and received is the same Word become flesh, eaten as the Bread of life. Communion in the Word, experienced at every Eucharist, is one contribution of the Church to the building up of a world of unity and peace.

We see in our time so much exchange of words happening at high speed and across national boundaries. But unfortunately the world is as divided as ever. Why is communion not achieved in spite of the exchange of words? Because Jesus is not the word they share and receive. When financial wizards talk about ways of manipulating the economy for their own profit, you do not call that communion—that is corruption! When politicians talk to people about grand promises without intending to fulfil them, you do not call that communion—that is cheating! When the powerful "negotiate" among themselves while neglecting the weak, you do not call that communion—that is oppression! When so-called enterprising persons deal with each other on how women and children could be profitable merchandise, you do not call that communion—that is slavery! When communion consists in Jesus who is the Word of Life then the common good becomes central. And that is pleasing to God's eyes.

To close this section, let me tell you a story. On my way back to the Philippines from one of my trips to Rome, I had a lay-over of more than three hours in an airport. To while away the time, I went around looking for a coffee bar. I found one, placed my order and paid. This is a normal human transaction, so I thought. The man who handed the coffee and the receipt asked, "Are you a priest?" A bit surprised, I said, "Yes." Then the next question, "Are you a Filipino?" Now truly amused, I smiled and said, "Yes." He turned to one corner of the store, and while waving to some people hidden from my sight, said, "He is the one! Come!" A group of Filipinos working in that airport came rushing to me. They said that they followed on YouTube or Facebook my weekly reflections on the readings for Sunday Mass shown on television, entitled *The Word Exposed*. Due to their irregular

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work schedule, they could not always be present at Mass. Through the Word they experience some form of communion with Jesus, they said. One woman commented, "Through your stories, we feel united with our families back home. How we miss them!" Communion in the Word can happen on-line and in unexpected places. We shared our stories until my coffee turned cold.

Part II: Communion in the Word through Mary

The Blessed Virgin Mary experienced communion in the Word in an utterly unique way. As a listener to and the bearer of the Word made flesh, she is the model and teacher for the Church. Let us contemplate her Immaculate Heart, where she guarded and pondered the mystery of the Word.

In her journey of faith, Mary initially received proclamations about Jesus, the Word of God who will become her son in the flesh. God sent messengers or "apostles" to her. From them she heard about her Son.

A. In the annunciation (Luke 1:26–28), the angel Gabriel sent by God proclaims a word to Mary. The very greeting "Rejoice!" signals that a special moment is about to happen to Mary and her people Israel that awaits the promised Messiah. Gabriel tells Mary that she will bear a son. But who is this child? In the words of the angel, Mary learns that her son will be great, for he is the Son of the Most High, the Son of David who will rule forever. This child will be holy, the Son of God. She who is a virgin will conceive by the overshadowing of the Holy Spirit. His name shall be Jesus, for God saves.

The angel proclaims to Mary a word about the Son of God. She listens intelligently, accepts in faith and utters her word, "Behold, I am the handmaid of the Lord. May it be done to me according to your word!" This is a singular moment of communion between God and Mary. By calling herself the handmaid of the Lord, she does not debase herself but accepts the grace of being part of God's saving action. She speaks in union with her people Israel in welcoming the Messiah that

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they have been pining for. Mary becomes Daughter Zion, the Ark of the New Covenant, by her communion with God in the Word.

By being in communion with the Word, the Church like Mary will actively promote God's saving plan in the world—not advancing its own projects but the will of God.

B. Let us now follow Mary as she visits her kinswoman Elizabeth, known to be barren but who is now with child (Luke 1:39–56). Filled with the Holy Spirit, Elizabeth tells Mary that the fruit of her womb is the Lord. She is the bearer of the Lord! As David danced before the Ark of the Covenant, now the baby in Elizabeth's womb dances before the Ark of the New Covenant.

Mary listens, accepts and utters her word, a song in praise of the merciful God, the immortal Magnificat. She sings of God's mercy in her life and through her, in the life of the poor and the oppressed of Israel. In her prayer she gives voice again to Sarah, Leah and Judith. In her song, we hear Miriam, Deborah and Hanna singing once more. Accepting the revelation about her son through Elizabeth, Mary becomes the mother of grace and hope for the poor.

By being in communion with the Word, the Church like Mary will be the companion of the poor so that they could recover their voice and sing for joy.

C. Then the time for Mary to give birth to her Son comes (Luke 2:1–20). They are in Bethlehem, the city of David. The Son of the Most High God is born in a manger. God sends messengers to tell Mary about her Son; they are the lowly shepherds. An angel that appeared to them at their night watch said that a Savior who is Messiah and Lord was born in Bethlehem. This birth would be news of joy to all the people. Indeed, a multitude of the heavenly host appeared to them in joyful praise of God.

Mary, with Joseph by her side, listens, accepts and responds in silence. What mother would not be rendered speechless by such a report about her son? Amazed like the rest who hear the story of the shepherds, she keeps all these things, reflecting on them in her heart.

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The most meaningful word is uttered in silence. Gazing upon the baby wrapped in swaddling clothes, she nurtures her communion in the Word through silence.

By being in communion with the Word, the Church like Mary will gladly listen to the lowly and the poor with reverential silence, listening to God speaking through them.

D. With Mary's ritual purification over, it is now time to present the Child Jesus in the Temple (Luke 2:22–38). God sends another poor man to utter a word about Jesus to Mary and Joseph—Simeon, filled with the Holy Spirit. With him is Anna, a poor widow. Like the many poor people of Israel, they search for freedom and joy in the promised Messiah. They recognize the Child. Simeon tells his parents that he is salvation (his name is Jesus), a light for revelation to the Gentiles and glory for Israel. In this Child, the nations of the world and Israel will be gathered in communion. But he will also be a sign to be contradicted, destined for the fall and rise of many in Israel.

Mary and Joseph are amazed at these words. She comes to the Temple to offer to God no less than what God has given her, namely God's Son who is her son. But the news of joy from Simeon is coupled with the disturbing word of contradiction that will not spare Mary, for she will be pierced by a sword. What is this sword? It is the Word of God, living and effective, sharper than any two-edged sword penetrating even between soul and spirit (Hebrews 4:12). The sword is Jesus, the Word of God. She is the mother of the One who will bear the cross. Mary listens, accepts and responds in amazement. She goes home to Nazareth where the Child grows in wisdom and grace. She nurtures Jesus her son, who will bring her both joy and sorrow.

By being in communion with the Word, the Church like Mary will proclaim Jesus in season or out of season, whether accepted or rejected, joyful with Him, sorrowful with Him (2 Timothy 4:2).

At this point, a shift occurs. From now on, the messenger who will speak to Mary about Jesus is Jesus Himself.

E. The scene is the annual Passover Feast. The family joins many pilgrims to Jerusalem. The boy Jesus is twelve years old (Luke 2:41–52).

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After completing their duties in the festivities and offering of sacrifice, Mary and Joseph return to Nazareth but Jesus stays behind, unknown to them. After three days of searching, they find him in the temple, listening to the teachers and asking them questions. Mary asks the boy why he did it to her and his father, to which he responds, "Why were you looking for me? Did you not know that I must be in my Father's house?" The Mother now listens to the stunning word of her Son. "Who is this boy?" she must be asking. Maybe thoughts like these cross her mind: sitting with the teachers in his Father's house, Jesus will surely fulfil the Law and the Prophets. Seeing the blood of the animals offered in his Father's house, he knows that the sacrifice of a pure heart is more pleasing to the Father than burnt offerings of animals.

Mary listens and accepts Jesus' enigmatic word to her, even if she does not understand. As before, she keeps all these things in her heart. In that immaculate heart overflowing with faith, she knows that one day her Son will disappear again. She knows that her heart will be pierced when that day comes. She knows that she will see him again after three days. She knows her heart will rejoice on that blessed third day.

By being in communion with the Word, the Church like Mary will look for Jesus among the lost, wounded, tired and abandoned, and lead them with rejoicing to the Father's house.

F. Let us now turn to the public of ministry of Jesus. The wedding at Cana is the site of his first "sign" (John 2:1–12). Mary tells Jesus that they have run short of wine. He utters a word to his mother that unsettles us: "Woman, how does your concern affect me? My hour has not yet come." For Jesus, his hour is the moment of glorification on the Cross, when life that is given up produces much fruit unto eternity (John 12:23–26). Maybe out of lack of understanding or out of helplessness, Mary listens, accepts and utters her own words to the servers: "Do whatever he tells you." They obey her and Jesus. And the miracle happens. It is the beginning of Jesus' hour after all. The wine is God's word and wisdom that will flow in abundance at the coming of the Messiah. Mary, who is obedient to her Son's word, now asks the servers to give Jesus full obedience as well. In the communion of obedience to the word, miracles happen.

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We run out of wine too: the wine of wisdom, understanding, insight, energy and meaning. God seems to be unreachable at times. When those moments come, know that Mary is close by. She sees our empty jars. She approaches Jesus for us. If we listen to Jesus and do what he tells us, those jars will overflow with unbelievably good wine.

By being in communion with the Word, the Church like Mary will be attentive to the emptiness experienced by our age and lead people not to us but to Jesus, for he alone can make miracles happen through his word.

G. According to the gospels, the last time Jesus talks to Mary is before he breathes his last on the cross (John 19:23–28). Jewish thought teaches that death disrupts communion, but not so for Jesus. On this hour of his glorification, with the four pagan soldiers vying for his tunic, and four women, with the beloved disciple mourning at the foot of his cross, he tells his mother, "Woman, behold your son." Then he says to the disciple, "Behold, your mother." Jesus reveals and creates his mother as the mother of the new family of disciples, of those who hear the word of God and act on it (Luke 8:21). Jesus' death, freely embraced in communion with God and with sinners, does not destroy community but gives birth to a new family. By the word of Jesus, Mary becomes the mother of both his disciples and the people called to believe in him. She responds to Jesus by doing what he says—she goes to the home of the beloved disciple.

Even now, Jesus beholds mothers and fathers who lose their children to hunger, diseases, wars, illegal drugs, sex tourism, immorality, false philosophies, and empty utopias. Jesus tells us to take care of the sorrowful mothers and fathers for they are our parents too. He tells us to look after the lost children of the world, for they are our daughters and sons too. No wound is so great that it could not be healed by love. By being in communion with the Word, the Church like Mary will be the seed of the new family of justice, healing and peace.

I recall a dark day when I was still a priest serving in my home diocese. One morning a young priest, 32 years of age, was found dead.

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His body, stabbed 32 times, was left in a rice field. He was a former student of mine. At the wake, I walked his mother toward the coffin. Upon seeing her lifeless son she shed tears of sorrow and cried out in prayer, "My God, you know how heavy my heart was when my son entered the seminary. But you prevailed. So I surrendered him to you. Now you took him again from me. If it is your wish, then I give him totally to you. He is all yours." I could not believe what I was hearing. A few days later, in a forum on justice that we attended, someone asked her, "What would you do if the killer of your son is presented to you?" I thought it was an insensitive question but before I could stop her, she already responded, "Dear police, do not hesitate to bring my son's killer to me. Do not fear. I will not hurt him. I just want to know why he did it. I will observe the dictates of justice but deep in my heart, I will forgive for Jesus tells me to forgive. My love might help make the killer a better person." Once again, I could not believe what was happening. But I know we were again at the foot of the cross and hearing the same words, "Woman, behold your son. Son, behold your mother." Those days were followed by many more weeks of listening to the stories of the priest's mother about her son and her family, stories that I would hear for the first time. I could not help but think then that I have come to know the priest much better now that he is gone but made more vividly present by his mother's stories.

H. I believe this also happened to Mary and her new family. After Jesus' ascension into heaven, the extended family of disciples with Mary went to the upper room to await the promised Holy Spirit who would remind us about Jesus (Acts 1:13–14). I would like to think that with the help of the same Spirit that overshadowed her at the annunciation, Mary could now understand better the things about Jesus that she had kept in her heart. Now she could proclaim her stories to her new sons and daughters: what she has heard, seen with her eyes, looked upon and touched with her hands concerning her Son, the Word of life. She must have ended every story by saying, "Do whatever he tells you." Like Mary, go and tell the good news of Jesus to the ends of the earth. And do whatever he tells you. Amen.

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