

MARY AND THE WORLD OF TODAY

by Cardinal Leo Jozef Suenens

If I try to describe this world in the midst of which we are living, I think it can be said that it is:

- A world that is trying to find its way;
- A world that is suffering in body and soul;
- A world that is hoping and dreaming of a better world.

I would like to contemplate with you, for a few moments, Mary as the answer for a world that is seeking, suffering, hoping. *Vita, dulcedo et spes nostra, salve.*

MARY IN A WORLD TRYING TO FIND ITS WAY

Our world is living a marvellous human adventure. One has only to become aware of everything that the space adventures represent: men on the moon, in a jeep, digging the soil of the moon, discovering a certain green stone that might very well go back to four billion years and more. It is a dazzling triumph of human science.

And there are not only these discoveries outside ourselves: science is also penetrating more and more deeply into the human soil: tomorrow perhaps, it may succeed in moulding and re-making man according to its own plan.

All that is at once grandiose and redoubtable.

But if science opens horizons indefinitely, it does not, however, solve the vital, essential questions that every man raises: what is, in the end, the ultimate meaning of this human adventure and of my life here below? What is there beyond death, even if it is delayed artificially? This is where real human concern lies, the mystery that mankind is ever probing.

This is the text of the paper of His Eminence, Cardinal Leo Jozef Suenens, Archbishop of Malines-Brussels, President of the International Marian Congress, read to the 13th International Marian Congress at Zagreb in August 1971.

Those questions need an answer, they need an answer at all costs. It is not enough to multiply means of living and techniques; the world needs reasons for living even more fundamentally, as Cardinal Marty so rightly said, not long ago.

It is here that Mary appears, offering men her Son, as the One who alone possesses the words of eternal life. Mary is at the heart of the mystery of the Incarnation: she is the Mother of Him who will be "the way, the truth and the life" for all time to come. On the threshold of men's search to solve the mystery of life, Mary offers herself to us, with a unique qualification, as the introducer. The story of the Wise Men is not just a story of the past: it is also the symbol of this permanent human quest. The Wise Men set out through the desert and the nights, watching out for the light that was to take them in the end to Bethlehem. The Scriptures tell us, with regard to them, that "going into the dwelling, they found the child there, with his mother Mary, and fell down to worship him" (Mt. 2, 11).

The discovery of Christ is made through meeting the Saviour's Mother: the Mother cannot be dissociated from the Child, nor the Child from the Mother, because the very mystery of the Incarnation takes on its whole significance only through the faithful and humbly consenting collaboration of her whom Tradition will call "Theotokos"

ESSENTIAL QUESTION

The world today needs to meet the face of its Saviour and the face of its Mother. The world is saturated with ideologies and philosophies which, whatever their contribution may be, do not answer its vital need, its essential questions.

Recently, I asked the German theologian, Karl Rahner, how he explained the present drop in Marian piety in the Church. His reply deserves attention: Too many Christians, he answered, whatever their religious obedience may be tend to make Christianity an ideology, an abstraction. And abstractions do not need a mother.

What Mary offers the world of today is the living and concrete reality of the Saviour of the world in his Incarnation. She forces us to believe that Christ is not, as we sometimes unconsciously imagine, a being partly God and partly man, but that He is completely divine and completely human.

Mary safeguards the realism of the mystery of the Incarnation. Her presence prevents Christianity for ever from being

a Docerism, a gnosis, a "Weltanschauung", a construction of the spirit. She is a source of life, not only for piety, but for Christian thought.

At Louvain University, we venerate Mary under the title "Sedes Sapientiae". Every master in theology, after his academic promotion, goes with his professors in a procession to the collegiate church of St. Peter, where her image is venerated.

May our seekers of today pay her filial cult. May we offer men in search of vital truth a Saviour who remains indissolubly the only-begotten and beloved Son of the Father, the ever loving Son of Mary, his Mother.

MARY IN A SUFFERING WORLD

The world of today is rich in hope, but it is, alas! also tormented by anguish in many forms. Vatican II expressed this ambiguous situation in the following pithy words that open the pastoral Constitution *Gaudium et spes* and which all remember: "The joys and the hopes, the griefs and the anxieties of the men of this age, especially those who are poor or in any way afflicted, these too are the joys and hopes, the griefs and anxieties of the followers of Christ. Indeed, nothing genuinely human fails to raise an echo in their hearts. For theirs is a community composed of men. United in Christ, they are led by the Holy Spirit in their journey to the kingdom of their Father and they have welcomed the news of salvation which is meant for every man. That is why this community realizes that it is truly and intimately linked with mankind and its history" (n. 1). The world is suffering: it would take too long to enumerate its ills: it is enough to open a newspaper every morning and listen to the radio or look at TV every evening, to see how unfit for habitation our earth still is and how much men are victims of fratricidal struggles, social conflicts and racial hatred.

We need, more than ever, a vast movement to humanize the world, a movement of real "sweetness of life", "vita dulcedo". Men aspire to see the world traversed, as by a Gulf Stream, by a vast movement of goodness, and real brotherhood.

And here again, Mary offers herself to us, as a kind of rainbow, an oasis of peace, a refuge for the brotherhood of men beyond what separates them. In a disunited family, the first step towards the reconciliation of the children is generally taken

in memory of their mother or at her appeal. Disunited Christians have also to hear her motherly voice, inviting them to forget the past, to rediscover their common home and its warmth.

Mary is a permanent invitation to Christians of every religious tradition: she urges them to rediscover the benefits of a unity that should never have been broken.

The Church suffers from her internal divisions; the world, too, suffers in its flesh and aspires to the peace that continually eludes us and to the brotherhood which alone can make a society lasting and true.

I am not surprised to find Mary mentioned in the Scriptures at the very time when we meet with the story of her Son's passion. It can be said that her compassion at the foot of the cross is so deep that it forms one with the passion of her Son. We must gaze earnestly at Mary, standing at the foot of the cross. The fiat of the Annunciation included, it is true, the fiat of Calvary, since the child to which she would give birth was to be the price of redemption; but at the foot of the cross, Mary completed, in her heart, what God did not require Abraham to go through with: the sacrifice of her only Son. In doing so, Mary penetrates, according to her station, of course, but like no human creature, the mystery of the redeeming sacrifice which she assumes in her name and in ours.

A theologian, Father Laurentin, has written: "Mary's sufferings are not juxtaposed alongside those of Jesus. They proceed from His; they are the very echo of the Son's suffering in the Mother's heart. And the Saviour is no more ignorant of these feelings of Mary than Mary is of Christ's pain. There is an exchange reaching the point of a kind of fusion between them. The Mother makes her Son's passion her own, and the Son makes his Mother's compassion his own... Mary made her Son's sufferings and intentions her own. And Christ took and integrated in his redeeming sacrifice the acts through which his Mother cooperated in it. By virtue of this close sharing, the Sovereign Priest can say to Mary what the priest says to the faithful: *Meum ac tuum sacrificium*" (P. 42, 48; R. Notre-Dame et la Messe).

Mary will help us to sanctify suffering and makes it an instrument of redemption, if we are able to accept it humbly, in faith, like her and with her. Mary too did not understand everything hidden at the heart of the ordeal. The Gospel tells us explicitly that she did not understand why Jesus remained

in Jerusalem for three days, without the knowledge of Mary and Joseph. But in the night of the ordeal, her loyalty remains indefectible.

Today, the world is still in darkness and the Church is witnessing painful defections. We are living a new kind of Good Friday: it is permissible to think that we are advancing through this suffering towards a purification of the Christians that we are, towards a new sense of the evangelical demands. But dawn is not yet breaking. Mary, Mother of the Church, is near us in those hours of crisis. May her motherly love envelop us and stimulate us — within the suffering of the Church and of men — to the faithfulness that is able to stand at the foot of the Cross and which knows that one day the Lord will roll away the stones that seem to seal a tomb.

MARY IN A WORLD THAT HOPES

However deep human suffering may be, the hope that lives in man's heart is tenacious and is continually reborn. Man cannot but hope in a better world. After every war, he reconstructs ruins and declares it will be the last of wars and that a new society is about to be born. He tirelessly begins again his dream of a better world.

And here again, at the heart of this hope, we meet Mary: *vita dulcedo et spes nostra*.

On the first page of the programme of the Congress, I found to my joy the following inscription: Mary, the source of a better world: *Maria origo mundi melioris*.

The world asks us to help it to make it more human, to give it a new face. To help to create this better world and bring men nearer one another, Mary appears to us not only as she who gave us Christ, the hope of men, but she is also, in her own special way, as the Council said: "A sign of hope for the pilgrim people of God". She is, according to Father Bouyer's fine expression: "the eschatological image of the Church". She shows us the future and the anticipation of the kingdom of God.

What mankind expects of the Church today, is the "supplement of soul" of which Bergson spoke.

By virtue of the Spirit, the Church has the mission of assuming this role as "supplement of soul". The Church as the

living community of Christ's disciple, is not a reality alien to the world.

Like the people bearing witness to Christ, she herself, belonging to the human family, lives in the midst of men as a community of exchanges, in order to keep "Christ's Word alive and operating".

Now, did not this Word of Christ appear, from its first forceful appearance in Judea, and throughout the centuries, as a gospel, that is good news which not only announces good things, but above all brings them about to the extent to which it is accepted in "the obedience of the faith", that is, in listening and faithfulness?

St. Paul calls these good things the fruits of the Spirit. Their names are: "love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, goodness, gentleness, self-control" (Gal. 5, 22-23).

What the Word of Christ brings about in the world, through the mediation of all those who open themselves to this Word and to the extent to which they open themselves to it, is not a flight into the desert, but a very pure sense of man, concern for one's neighbor without respect of persons, a deep transformation of human relations; in short, just what our world, in search of truth, justice and freedom, needs so much just now.

Christianity presupposes high esteem for man, inseparable, moreover, from belief in an infinitely good God, the Father of all humans. It appeared in the world as a factor of humanization, liberation and social solidarity of generous fruitfulness, conferring on every human person a dignity that transcends all earthly goods, and on human life an infinite value.

Christianity contributed greatly to introducing and maintaining in the world respect for life and death, the sentiment of the radical equality of all men, love of truth and of truthfulness (If your word be; yes, if it is yes; no, if it is no, the Gospel says), a high conception of freedom and responsibility, modesty and sweetness in human relations, a sense of moderation and a horror of fanaticism, faithfulness in love and the sacred character of family society, the priority of work over money; in short, the admirable range of ethical and spiritual values, the nature of which is precisely to save the human person from the dictatorship of the anonymous forces that threaten it, namely, the excessive mechanization of human work, and

all-powerful technocracy, the anonymity of a public opinion based on demagoguery.

The Church believes she is the depository of spiritual riches which can make the earth a better place to live in. She is advancing towards this world of today, as once Peter advanced towards the man lying on the threshold of the temple. He expected a gesture of assistance from Peter; the latter said to him simply: "Silver and gold are not mine to give, I give thee what I can. In the name of Jesus Christ of Nazareth, rise up and walk!" (Acts 3, 6).

Mary is she who continually prepares the future: it was she who gave birth to Jesus, the chief of the elect, and she wants his kingdom to come and grow in all. Mary is the one whose whole destiny is to hasten the coming of Christ. For all men, she is Our Lady of Advent. She is this for the baptized, in whom Christ is already born, but in whom He must still grow and increase to reach his full stature. She is this also for all those who have not yet discovered the Saviour, for those souls of goodwill groping for Him in the darkness, but who have not yet made out the signs in the sky, or those who, if they have seen the star shine, have not yet had the strength to leave their native land, set out, lay the gold, myrrh and incense at his feet.

She calls us to the Lord's service, so that we may, with her bring Christ to men who are dying because they do not know Him. In communion and in faithful and active collaboration with her, may Mary daily become to an increasing extent Our Lady of Epiphany for the world that is coming.

With the light of a faith nourished by spiritual reading, priests can carefully detect the signs of God's will and the impulses of His grace in the various happenings of life, and thus can become more docile day by day to the mission they have undertaken in the Holy Spirit.

They can always find a wondrous model of such docility in the Blessed Virgin Mary. Led by the Holy Spirit, she devoted herself entirely to the mystery of man's redemption. With the devotion and veneration of sons, priests, this Queen of the Apostles and protectress of their ministry.

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