

The Blessed
Virgin Mary
and the
Congregation
of the Passion

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Jubilaevum

Scriptural Text- *“He has looked upon his hand-
maid’s lowliness.”* (Lk.1:46-49)

Additional texts: Lk.1:26-38; Jn.19:25-27; Gal.4:3-7.

To be *“looked upon”* is to feel loved, honored. The ex-
perience of love is a wonderful thing. Gazing and
being gazed upon is also the experience of lovers.
Passionists preach that God loves us, especially
from the cross. Letting yourself be looked upon by
God or letting yourself be loved is one of the most
interesting adventures for a human being.

Before commenting on the text, I want to offer an
overview of the figure of Mary in the Passionist
Congregation. In Paul of the Cross’ letter to Bish-
op Francesco Arborio di Gattinara (1721) he writes
that he was inspired to look up at the hermitage
of Our Lady of Gazzo on Mount Sestri, near Genoa.
He said he received the inspiration to wear peni-
tential garb, walk barefoot, live in solitude, and do
penance. Therefore, the first inspiration to found

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the Congregation would come from Our Lady. He also wrote to the bishop about his desire to gather companions to preach holy fear (love) of the Lord.

One day when he left the church of the Capuchins, according to what he told Rosa Calabresi, he had a vision of Our Lady dressed in the Passionist Habit. However, Paul wrote to Bishop Gattinara that he felt as if he himself was clothed with the Habit and that he bore the name of Jesus on his chest, rather than Our Lady. In 1721, Paul travelled to Rome and under the gaze of the icon of Our Lady, the “Salus Populi Romani” (the “Health of the Roman people”) he made the vow of the Passion.

Subsequently, he lived in two chapels dedicated to Our Lady: the shrine of the Madonna della Catena and the shrine of La Civita. Between 1722 and 1723 he lived in the hermitage of the Annunciation, on Monte Argentario where he cancellare grew to appreciate more profoundly this message of Mary.

The seven Sorrows of Mary had a special place in his spirituality, as did Mary’s Presentation. In the month of October, Mary’s motherhood was celebrated. However for Paul, the most celebrated feast of Mary was the Assumption-- the most important fruit of Jesus’ Passion, Death and Resurrection. It was its most tangible effect. Paul prepared for this feast for 40 days, abstaining from fresh fruit and other mortifications, while praying the 15 mysteries of the rosary. During the novena he began a solemn fast. He said that during this 40-day period the religious should seek to grow in holiness by observing the Rule and imitating Mary’s virtues. Everyone was to aspire to go to heaven with Mary. However, the Founder’s practice did not become customary in the Congregation.

Mary was the true superior of a retreat. The religious were instructed that when leaving their room, they should ask Mary for permission, discerning whether there was sufficient reason to abandon the solitude of their room. Each day they had to practice some virtuous act in her honor in order to obtain the enlightenment and the grace to do their best pastoral work and other ministries.

Five of the twelve retreats Paul founded had our Lady as their patron. Paul’s writings reveal that he regarded his devotion to Mary linked to Jesus, “to whom she gave her flesh” and to the Trinity. He appreciated Our Lady standing before the Crucified One (Jn 19:25-27). He saw Mary as the daughter of the Father, the Mother of the Word and the Spouse

of the Holy Spirit. He prayed the rosary that hung from his waist. The novices had to pray a rosary through the corridors of the retreat, bearing an image of Mary and handing out many short prayers especially on Saturdays, as “flowers of Mary”.

Mary’s feasts were important throughout the liturgical year, because she had to become the model that we had to follow in order to be a good Passionist religious. At Christmas, Paul especially remembered Mary because she was chosen to bear Jesus, to bring God into the world. Religious must do the same-- receive Jesus in one’s heart and soul and to let Jesus grow and be present, to give birth to Him through preaching and in everyday life. Thus, Marian holidays aimed to bring Jesus to birth in the world.

Thomas Struzziere introduced the devotion to Our Lady, *Mother of Holy Hope*, who bears the Child Jesus in her arms while holding a small cross in her hands. This painting was in the room of every religious. At this moment in time, I believe that this title is especially important because we see the Congregation diminishing and we do not see future clearly. We need hope more than ever. In his



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encyclical “Saved in Hope” (*Spe Salvi*) Pope Benedict XVI wrote about the importance of this virtue in our ecclesial and personal journeys.

Finally, an image of our Lady in Passionist garb also emerged. Fr. Generoso Privitera, the founder of the Secular Institute of Passionist missionaries was inspired to present Our Lady dressed in the Passionist Habit; but this devotion never received official approval. However, he placed our Sign on her chest and presented her as the first Passionist and a model for our religious.

The proposed text, *Mary’s Magnificat*, is significant for me. Mary feels “looked upon” and loved by God. This look of God upon her made her the happiest woman in the world. Now everyone will call her blessed because God gazed upon her, despite her insignificance and poverty. She introduces us to a God who looks upon us and loves us. He is a God who not only looks, but also works and acts. He exalts the poor and he humbles the rich. He looks upon those who have no food and feeds them, while those who have an abundance are turned away hungry. Feeling looked upon and loved is the most beautiful thing in the world. Paul of the Cross tells us that this love is experienced most profoundly in the Passion. It is a gaze that becomes an offering of one’s life, the greatest possible manifestation of love. It is central to life, in particular Christian life.

In the Brazilian city of Curitiba, I met a boy who traveled 2,000 kilometers to see his fiancé. I said to him, “You must really like this girl.” The answer

was-- “For this woman I would go to the end of the world.” When we preach the love that God has for us, we Passionists have the strength to go to the ends of the earth.

The Marian dogmas, applied to us, are interesting. Mary, the Mother of God, shows us that the Church – and each of us is Church – can also be a mother like Mary when we show concern and care, and teach like her. We are virgins like Mary when we listen and know how to receive and welcome. The Church is also a virgin when she welcomes, receives, and allows the Word of God, the sacraments, and all sources of grace, to bear fruit. Mary is the Virgin par excellence and FULL OF GRACE because she knew how to receive the grace and the very life of Jesus.

The Immaculate Conception reveals the fight against evil and sin. Beneath the feet of the image is a snake. We must also fight the serpent of sin because it is poisonous and can be deadly. By baptism, we are also freed from “original sin,” something which today seems to be overlooked.

As you pray with the text, allow yourself “to look and to be looked upon” by God, by Mary, by others, by the world. Love others and let them love you. You, too, will be strengthened and be inspired to travel even to the ends of the world.

On a practical level, how would you describe your Marian devotion?

How do you assume Mary’s nature that is especially articulated in Marian dogmas?

Are you aware of Mary’s importance in the Congregation?