

# HAIL MARY, OUR SISTER

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I need to confess that since ever the devotion to Mary was difficult for me. Yes, I know, you will tell me that I am Polish and the love of Mary I have drunk with the milk of my mother. That's for sure. But even thought, to learn to love Mary has been for me a hard process. In the years of religious formation, I felt identified with experience of Francisco Palau who also had to strive for discovering a place of Mary in his life. He really tried to love Mary as his mother, Mother of God, Queen of heaven and earth, but all these titles, worthy indeed of Mary, haven't satisfied his heart. Only when he discovered in Mary the perfect image of the true object of his love: the Church, his heart was satisfied. He wrote about it in these words:

For many years I had been making efforts to stir up my love for Mary, the Mother of God, and I was not yet satisfied with my devotion to her. My heart was searching for its beloved, I was searching for my Spouse; and in Mary I saw only acts which deserved gratitude, filial love, but my love did not find its object in her" (MR 1,5)

In my personal journey with Mary, there is another Marian invocation, much loved in Teresian Carmel: Mary, our Sister. In real life, I've never had a sister, only one brother. We love each other, but I can imagine that this love is not the same as a love of a sister. I've always envied the relationship my friends (girl-friends) had with their sisters. There is something peculiar in it. It's true that we don't choose our family; it's given to us. Just like in religious life. It is also true that sisters use to have bad connection, but in the moment of necessity they are the ones on whom we can count. Every day they fight, argue, quarrel, "steal" stuff like dresses and make-up. But if there is any kind of danger from outside, they stand strong and firm as a wall and know well how to protect each other.

In Carmelite spirituality we consider Mary, among other things, as our sister. When the Order was founded somewhere in XII century, the first hermits chose the name of the Brothers of the Virgin Mary of Mount Carmel. BROTHERS! Why not sons? Why not servants? They wanted to be called brothers, for sure for some reason. Father Palau continued this tradition naming the congregation he founded "Brothers of the Blessed Virgin Mary". What singularity does this adoration have?

In the recent document of the Order of Discalced Carmelites called "Be discalced: charismatic declaration of The-

resian Carmel" (2019) we can read in the paragraph titled "Brothers of the Virgin Mary":

"In Carmel we have yet another resource for living fraternity. The name that identifies us in the Church is "discalced brothers of Mary". We are "brothers," and therefore, fraternity is not an accessory element, but a substantial one. We are not "fathers", that is, priests who live in fraternity: we are brothers, and "discalced" brothers, that is, without other riches or resources to present to the world except that of a fraternity that unites us to Mary and ourselves. As fraternity, the relationship with Mary is not a particular aspect or devotion in Carmel, but expresses the essence of our vocation. There is a sort of mutual mirroring between Mary and the community: on the one hand Mary is the image and model of the community, on the other hand, the community is the image of Mary" (nº 40).

It is somehow curious that this document puts Mary not in the part about spiritual life, but it mentions her speaking about the life in community. Effectively, the relationship with Mary has its basis not in devotion that we learn at home. It is a kind of relation we learn thanks to our experience in community. In some way, our life in community mirrors our relationship with Mary. How? Let us begin, for example, with poverty. Without any doubt, Mary was poor; in fact, many biblists associate Mary with the Hebrew movement of "anawim": the poor of Yahweh. This concept has not only material meaning, but it comes to signify "beggar" (and the Order of Carmel is one of mendicant orders). It evokes humility, conscience of one's own limits, of one's own existential condition of poverty. They are those who trust in the Lord, knowing that they depend on him totally. It is this kind of poverty of the spirit which transforms into a style of life lived by those who experience themselves free in front of things and acquire a new way of seeing the world of poverty: we have so much to offer to the poor and so much to learn from them<sup>1</sup>. Reading these words of Pope Francis, other words come to my mind, this time of Father Palau:

"I wish that all of you will be one heart animated by one and the same spirit (...) To this end you have to practice (I see with satisfaction that you are already doing) these virtues: 1st Blind obedience, be humble, submissive, ready, joyful, simple (...) 2nd Love among yourselves (...) 3rd

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<sup>1</sup>Pope Francis, *Walking with Jesus: the essence of Christian life*

Poverty (...) 4th For those in authority: love, solicitude, interest, prudence and discretion (...)

Observing these virtues, you will live in peace and will build a house where God dwells and takes delight. God is the prince of peace and dwells only in hearts united by love. Being united, go together, captivated by the chains of God's love. Go by the same way. A five-year child could lead you; it is to say, Jesus Christ will be your guide" (Letter 7,2-3)

These indications Father Palau offered to us for the life in community. No need to repeat that Mary was the first one who knew how to obey with joy and humility to the will of God, who knew how to love extremely, who knew to be poor having in God her only richness. Because of this, she also knew to live inside the first community of disciples just like equal among equals, as another one who believed that the promises of God will be fulfilled, as another one who awaited this fulfillment united in prayer with all disciples. She allowed that her son ("a five-year child") would guide her and she invited us to do the same: "Do whatever he commands you" (Jn 2:5).

Mary is the mirror where each community should look at herself. How is our obedience, as community: this joyful and simple obedience that makes of each day another opportunity for a new adventure with the Church? How is our mutual love: this love that doesn't look on weaknesses of others but goes out to encounter them with concrete gestures of amiability? How is our communitarian poverty: this kind of detachment from ourselves, our desires and preferences, our small wisdoms and efforts to be more than others? What about animators? How is our solicitude for our sisters: this attitude of taking care of the needs of others more than of ours, of asking "how are you?" even when I'm already fed up with you?

How would we treat Mary if she was living with us, just as one more sister? Not as an animator of community, but as this simple sister who spends unending hours seated at the gate of a school, or closed in her room praying "Hail Mary" million times a day, or as that other one who runs from one encounter to another without time to sit in chapel or at the table... Mary teaches us the art of being sisters who together sing the marvels of the Lord, who await together during long cold hours of winter the arrival of an unexpected guest, who weave together the story of salvation through the thin threads of everyday life, who allow themselves being guided by "the smallest in the house" because they know to give way in adequate time.

Mary mirrors also the Church of which she is image and figure. May also the Church be a sister for all, who lives in obedience, love, poverty and fraternal solicitude allowing the "small ones" to guide her for the paths of God.

Happy Feast Day of Our Lady of Mount Carmel, Our Sister!.

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