

*The Marian Heart in the 21st Century: How devotion to Mary
can change our lives.*

by Sister Joan Bernadette

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Dear Friends of the Sacred Heart,

A number of years ago I read a fascinating biography of the Civil War general Stonewall Jackson. Remembering little from my elementary and secondary studies on this famous Southern war hero, I took a volume to bed with me and began my journey back into time. The book was so well written and researched that I could hardly put it down. Of all the information packed into its pages, the part that stayed with me most vividly was the end which recounted Stonewall Jackson's death. Jackson, who was a deeply religious man, though not a Catholic, valued highly the spiritual side of Sundays. Even as a confederate general engaged in the strategy of planning battles, Stonewall would do his best not to deploy his troops in combat, if at all possible, on Sundays. It was a day that had profound meaning for him. Early on in the war in a night raid, Jackson was mistakenly shot by his own comrades, and as a result of his injuries had to have his arm amputated. He ultimately developed pneumonia, a medical condition fatal in those days. In and out of consciousness he lapsed until the day of his death. On that final day, opening his eyes, he inquired of those around him, "What day is it?" "Sunday," they answered. "It is providential," he said.

This story came to mind as I watched with the rest of the world the awesome funeral liturgy of our beloved Holy Father John Paul II. Isn't it "providential." I thought that Our Holy Father who loved Mary so much as to choose as his papal motto "Totus Tuus" meaning "I am completely yours, O Mary" should leave us on her special day, Saturday, and at a time when the vigil of a feast having immense significance in his pontificate – that of the Divine Mercy was close at hand.

Because it is May, I would like to share some findings and reflections on Mary's role in the spiritual transformation of our world especially at this important juncture of history as we cross the threshold into a new millennium. Already we see that the thrust of our new Holy Father's priorities will lie in the field of ecumenism or unity among the Churches. There are those who believe that dialogue about Mary can hasten this reconciliation, for there is no cause more dear to the Mother of God than the unity of God's family.

In his former role as Cardinal Prefect of the Sacred Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith, our Holy Father once wrote: If the place occupied by Mary has been essential to the equilibrium of the Faith, today it is urgent, as in few other epochs of Church history, to rediscover that place. Yes, it is necessary to go back to Mary if we want to return to that truth about Jesus Christ, truth about the Church, and truth about man that John Paul II proposed as a program to the whole of Christianity

when in 1979, he opened the Latin American episcopal conference in Puebla, Mexico. The Bishops responded to the Pope's proposal by stating that Mary must be more than ever the pedagogy, in order to proclaim the Gospel today. [The Ratzinger Report p. 106] He also adds: The correct Marian devotion guarantees to the faith the co-existence of the indispensable 'reason' with the equally indispensable 'reasons of the heart', as Pascal would say. For the Church, man is neither mere reason nor mere feeling, he is the unity of these two dimensions. The head must reflect with lucidity, but the heart must be able to feel warmth: devotion to Mary (which 'avoids every false exaggeration on the one hand, and excessive narrow-mindedness in the contemplation of the surpassing dignity of the Mother of God on the other', as the Council urges) thus assures the faith its full human dimension. [The Ratzinger Report p. 108]

One recommendation which all of us can surely take to heart involves prayer for unity. Prayer builds the Church and the community of the sacraments in which the prayers of the Church are heard return to us. Listen again to a story related by our new Holy Father: One summer I encountered a pastor who told me that what weighed upon him most when he took over his pastoral responsibilities was that for decades no vocations to the priesthood had emerged from his parish. What was he to do? One cannot make vocations, only the Lord himself can give them. But do we then have to lay our hands in our laps? With his concern, he decided to make a pilgrimage each year along the arduous path to the Marian shrine in Altötting and to invite all who shared his concern to go along and to pray with him. More and more people went each year, and this year, to the immeasurable joy of the whole village, they were able to celebrate for the very first time a mass for a newly ordained priest. [Communio, Fall 1986, pp. 240 – 241. The Marian shrine of Altötting is located at the heart of Bavaria, near the Alps. In 1623 Duke Maximilian I declared the Black Madonna the Patron Saint of Bavaria. Joseph Ratzinger, now Pope Benedict XVI, place of birth is near to this popular Marian shrine.]

Along with prayer, another dimension of our participation in the work of unity focuses on the cross. "The ripened fruit of the cross is the unity of Christians". "It is he who is our peace, and who made the two of us one ...to create in himself one new man from us who had been two and to make peace, reconciling both of us to God in one body through his cross' [Ephesians 2: 14 -16]. "The unity among Christians cannot be primarily the fruit of a plan: it is born of the consciousness of the original unity generated by the cross of Christ...to take up one's cross...to welcome the cross of another- to allow oneself to be nailed to it just as the Mother of God was pierced on Calvary by the two-edged sword prophesied by Simeon." [Communio, Spring, 1988, p. 54.] By embracing the cross as Mary did we embrace "the whole universe together with Christ, since the arms of the cross open to embrace the entire world, nature and cosmos." [Ibid, p. 50.] As a contemporary writer has testified: "Pain lived in the light of the cross of Christ is transformed into an offering. It becomes the birth pangs of the 'new creation.' It is 'turned to the future' in the sense that it is conscious of participating in the building up of the Body of Christ."

In this 'Body of Christ' Mary is the one who teaches us the great meaning of interiority, of drawing closer to God from one's center of being, of valuing 'things from above' before all else. She is turned wholly toward the Father and invites us to follow her lead. She is the immaculate one whose unblemished trust bears the fruits of the Holy Spirit and who tells us that the more we place our trust in God, the more spiritual fruit we will bear as well.

It is well known that our Holy Father John Paul loved saying the Rosary. In his youth, he was greatly influenced by his association with a Polish layman named Jan Tyranowski. Of Tyranowski, John Paul's spiritual director once wrote: "He was a spiritual Alpinist and had the deepest spirituality he has encountered in 25 years. Grace radiated from his face, his eyes, his person, demanding reverence." Tyranowski suggested to Karol Wojtyla to read St. Louis de Montfort's classic *True Devotion to Mary*. The reading of this book was a decisive turning point in the future Pope's life. John Paul II's great vision for the Church received tremendous impetus from his love of the Blessed Virgin Mary. In his Apostolic Letter *Mulieris Dignitatem* (27) he departs from the customary way of citing solely from magisterial documents, and draws from the thoughts of the Swiss theologian Hans Urs von Balthasar: "This marian profile is also – even perhaps more so – fundamental and characteristic for the Church as is the Apostolic and Petrine profile to which it is profoundly united.. .The Marian dimension of the Church is antecedent to that of the Petrine, without being in any way divided from it or being less complementary. Mary Immaculate precedes all others, including obviously Peter himself and the Apostles.. .The dimensions of structure, power, institution in the Church are meaningful only in function of and with a view to love. Mary does not represent anything, she is simply the Church of love in its most eminent member, whose eminence consists precisely in an intimate relationship of communion with all the other members of the body of Christ. [Communio, Spring 2003, p. 37]

What has come to be known as 'the Marian principle' (attributed in large measure to the thinking of Hans Urs von Balthasar) re-emphasizes the deep femininity of the Church, its mystical character, its ability to reach out beyond itself. One can note this approach in the overtures of welcome made by Pope John Paul II and Pope Benedict XVI to those of other faiths. The future of our Church may well be shaped by the use of the Marian principle.

Each of us can pray that what has borne fruit in Mary through the Spirit will also bear fruit in our endeavors to trust profoundly in God. John Paul's own final parting on the day of Mary and the eve of Mercy remind us to never stop hoping and trusting. Despite the complexities of our world, the pressures of living, the injustices and misunderstandings that assail us in life's journey, the light which shines through the darkness carries within it the promise that God's providential love will be with us to the end. Mary can indeed show us the way with her listening, trusting heart, inspiring us to believe that nothing in this world is impossible with God.