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“HUMBLE AND HIGHEST CREATURE” Walking with Mary, Mistress of Integral ecology

10. Virgin Mother

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“Virgin Mother” are the words with which St. Bernard's prayer to Mary opens in the last canto of Dante's *Divine Comedy*. “Daughter of your Son,” the poet continues, “humble and highest creature”: this is the verse that has served as the overall title of these monthly meditations of ours on Mary and ecology, and which we will now finally try to explore and understand better.

It is, in fact, three antitheses that the Supreme Poet inserts one after the other at the very opening of his invocation to Mary. The antithesis is a rhetorical figure composed of two elements that are normally incompatible with each other, which in this case have the function of highlighting the extraordinary nature of the figure of Mary and her human and believing experience. In Mary, in fact, virginity of body and heart stand together with the fruitfulness of an extraordinary motherhood. Thus she is the mother of Christ, whose, however, by faith she is also the daughter and, finally, while being exemplary in her humility, she is raised by God above every other creature.

Jesus' identity, too, for those who believe, is defined through the extraordinary antithesis that proclaims him truly man like us, and truly God, like his Father. As man, the Son is immanent to creation, part of it, belonging to it precisely because of his birth from Mary. As God, at the same time, he transcends creation, by virtue of his eternal generation from the Father and participates together with the Spirit in the creation of the world.

This very special position between God and the world makes the Son the mediator of salvation. In him, says the letter to the Ephesians, all things are recapitulated (Eph 1:10), that is, all that is created is taken back into God's hands and brought to its fullness, which is communion of perfect love in the Trinity.

As far as Mary is concerned, it is interesting to point out that the three antitheses with which Dante describes her concern not so much in her individuality but precisely in her relationship with Trinitarian God: her relationship with the Spirit, who made her Mother by forming in her womb the Son without compromising her virginity; her relationship with the Son, whom she educated and by whom she allowed herself to be educated, in an extraordinary reciprocity; and her relationship with the Father Creator, who willed her from the beginning and raised her up to Himself in glory.

To complete Dante's first triplet that opens St. Bernard's prayer to Mary, one verse is still missing. So far, in fact, we have focused only on the first two. The third verse of the stanza reads thus, “termine fisso d'eterno consiglio,” meaning that Mary is the completion of God's eternal will, with which God, in his wisdom, created the universe. Just as when a painter sets out to draw a landscape according to the laws of perspective and must first mark the vanishing point, a fixed point, toward which all lines converge, in the same way the Trinity imagined, before he began to create, his own expectations and wishes for his creatures.



Like Mary, all creation is made fruitful by the power of the Spirit. God's creative power does not compromise, does not destroy, the virginal beauty of creation; it makes it flourish without delaying it. The whole creation, moreover, in each of its creatures, is created in a special relationship with the Son whose cradle it is and by whom it is cradled from eternity as in a womb. Finally, every creature, in its unique identity and in the multiplicity of its relationships, is willed by the Father and is created to be raised in the glory of his love.

In its fragility, in its interdependence, every creature is humble, or rather, is called to humility. Nothing that is created, in fact, is sufficient for itself, and this radical lack of self-sufficiency is a blessing because it forces one to open oneself, to give oneself and to receive as a gift. It can become, however, also a curse, when the creature, the human being in particular, distressed by the fear of fragility and death turns toward his neighbor like a predator and instead of making flourish he destroys, instead of opening himself to reciprocal gift, he robs his neighbor, nature and even God.

The three antitheses proposed by Dante, therefore, read through the key offered by the verse that closes the triplet, contains a whole program of ecological conversion and a splendid summary of the theological foundation of integral ecology. At first glance, perhaps, the reference to Mary's virginity and motherhood might lead us astray and make us think that this is something that concerns only the Mother of God and not us. It is crucial to remember, in this regard, how the Church Fathers interpreted Mary's virginity, that is, as the wholeness of the creature fresh from the hands of the creator. They believed that human beings lost their original integrity as a result of sin, not as a result of sexual union. Because of sin, the encounter between man and woman and the relationship with children, beginning with the moment of childbirth, is marked by pain and violence. Recovering original virginity means being able to experience fruitfulness and mutual gift without violence. This original virginity, which for Mary is one with the immaculate conception, is restored to believers through baptism.

After sin, all creation is marked by violence. Indeed, St. Paul, in his letter to the Romans, affirms that the whole creation suffers and groans to this day the pangs of childbirth, as it awaits the revelation of the sons of God (Rom. 8:19-22). Indeed, the evil that human beings introduce into the world through their wrong choices undermines the harmony of the whole creation. Creation, too, therefore awaits redemption from God. But this redemption of creation can only come through the adherence of men and women to the salvation offered by God. Precisely for this reason, it is necessary and urgent that we work to educate and spread the Pope's teaching about integral ecology and ecological conversion, because on the cooperation of each of us depends the fulfillment of the new creation initiated by the Father with the incarnation of the Son in the virgin and fruitful womb of Mary.

Certainly Dante, in his time, could not have imagined the climate crisis and ecological catastrophe we are going through in this century. He did, however, know the heart of the human being and his need to be touched, saved by love in order to learn to love without envy, without selfishness, without violence. This is why Dante, at the end of the long journey that from the depths of human misery led him to the heights of holiness, turns precisely to Mary: because it is not enough to know goodness in order to practice it, we need someone to walk ahead of us and show us, step by step the way. We need a mother, a sister, a friend, who understands our struggle and is able to encourage us, console us and show us the goal. Here the Father, knowing this, thought of Mary and placed her as the fixed star on our horizon, as the vanishing point toward which the sometimes twisted lines of our lives converge. Let us once again entrust ourselves to her intercession, ask her for the gift of purity and fruitfulness in all our relationships, actions and intentions.