



ECHO OF MARY

Queen of peace

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Our Lady's message 25 January 2003:

"Dear Children, with this message I call you anew to pray for peace. Particularly now when peace is in crisis, be those who pray and bear witness to peace. My dear Children, be peace in this restless world. Thank you for responding to my call."

Be peace!

In explicit words Mary warns us against the danger of war which looms over the world: peace is in crisis. The powerful of the world are not able to assure peace; perhaps they don't want to, or don't know how to, but the end result is the same, for peace does not depend on them. Now, if the world's powerful can't do anything, what can we do if we have no say at all? "God chose what is foolish in the world to shame the wise, God chose what is weak in the world to shame the strong, God chose what is low and despised in the world, even things that are not, to bring to nothing things that are" (1 Co 1:27-28). "The very stone which the builders rejected has proved to be the keystone" [Ps 117 (118); Mk 12:10]. "The bows of the mighty are broken, but the feeble have girded themselves with strength... The barren woman bears sevenfold, but the mother of many is desolate..." (1 Sam 2:4-5). "He scattered the proud-hearted; He pulled down princes from their thrones and exalted the lowly" (Lk 1:51-52). Know what your strength is; Jesus Christ is your strength! Be aware of the gravity of the call of Mary who came to Medjugorje as the Queen of Peace. And let us move hastily; by the grace of God we are still in time, but it takes on our part a radical conversion of heart. This is no longer a time for words - and even prayers can be mere words and totally ineffective, if not offensive.

Particularly now when peace is in crisis, be those who pray and bear witness to peace. Prayer for peace cannot be limited to verbal invocations. Our prayer must be strengthened and verified by our witness. Reciting formulas for peace isn't enough, we must give witness with our lives, with our everyday lives. We must accept that peace which Jesus gave us (Jn 14.27) and live according to it in our relationships with others, no matter what might happen, no matter what situation we are in. How can we pray if we do not have peace within us? How can we present to God our offering if we know that a brother is not

at peace with us (Mt 5:23)? Mary's call is extremely clear and explicit: be peace in this restless world! Doing something for peace isn't enough. Peace marches in town squares aren't enough, and very little can they do.

Peace depends on us; we have to be peace for the world. Our way of thinking, of acting, of living, our will must testify to peace. Our heart, our body, our soul must be peace in the world. Together with Jesus and in Him we dare to say to the Father: "You wanted no sacrifice or oblation, but you prepared a body for me. You took no pleasure in holocausts or sacrifices for sin. Then I said, 'God, here I am! I am coming to obey your will' " (Heb 10:5-7). May everything in us be prayer - be those who pray & so that we can breathe the Father's Love and be channels of peace and hope, be megaphones for His Word. Thank you Mary for being with us. Still you teach us, guide us, urge us. Thank you for your Love, and patience, and perseverance. We do not deserve as much, but we offer you our life with sincere hearts. Take it, o Mother; in your hands it can become a gift for the Father and fruit of love and peace for our brethren the world over.

Nuccio Quattrocchi

Our Lady's message of 25 Feb. 2003:

"Dear Children, Also today I invite you to pray and to fast for peace. Just as I have said already - and I repeat it also today my Children - it is only with prayer and fasts that wars too can be stopped. Peace is a precious gift of God. Seek it, pray for it, and you will receive it. Speak of peace and bear peace in your hearts. Nurture it as you would a flower which needs water, loving care and light. Be those who carry peace to others. I am with you and I intercede for all of you. Thank you for responding to my call."

Prayer and fasting can stop war

With an ugly war looming over our heads, and when all efforts of those who work for peace seem vain, here is a wonderful message of hope. It comes from Mary, the Queen of Peace. Easy and practical, it is addressed to all and especially to those who believe in Her presence at Medjugorje: that is, her children, whom she nurtures with infinite patience and immense love. Prayer and fasting for peace is not a new way, for many times Mary has encouraged us to do the same. Here today she has come to remind us of it & not with reproaching words (even though we deserve it), but with motherly concern. "Just as I have said already - and I repeat it also today my Children - it is only with prayer and fasts that wars too can be stopped."

It is the only way, and is within the reach of all. Also the Pope insistently calls us to "work" for peace; asking for an entire year of prayer for peace and the family (starting last

October); and he gave us the mysteries of Light so that the Rosary would cover also Jesus' earthly life. As if that weren't enough, he has called us to dedicate our prayer and fast of Ash Wednesday to the cause of peace. Let's take these calls of his seriously. They are the only way to put a stop to the hatred which is throwing the world headlong into war. Our responsibility is great; greater than what we can imagine. Peace depends on us. It depends on me, and on you. Blaming others, or waiting for others to move is counteractive. It only takes ten righteous people to stop the Lord's hand (Gen 18.32). Each of us is being called to respond, individually, and individually we will be called to respond to God if we decide to refuse. Might our response be: Here I am! Let's assume our responsibility with simplicity, humility and seriousness. May our determination be strong, our faith great, our hope steadfast.

"Peace is a precious gift of God," but the Gospel points out that it's a gift assured for men of good will (Lk 2:14), i.e. those who do God's will; and it was a gift left in inheritance for Jesus' disciples (Jn 14:27). So let's follow the Pope's advice and pray the Holy Rosary and contemplate Christ's presence in our lives, and find in His earthly Life the key to understanding our own; and offer to Him all its sorrows, difficulties and problems so we will know the reason for our hope (cf. 1Pt 3:15). May our prayer be an open heart which listens to the Word of God, and may our lips be pure when we pronounce His Name. May our fast be abstinence from the superfluous, with regards to food but also abstinence from abuse of power and all forms of abuse, and from the hedonism of the rich countries in particular for which everything, even the human person, is an object of consumerism. Prayer and fasting will obtain for us the gift of peace. Seek it, ask for it in prayer, and you will receive it, Mary assures us. Speak of peace and bear peace in your hearts. Nurture it as you would a flower in need of water, loving care and light. These elements, which man cannot produce but which are necessary so that the flower of peace does not wilt before its time, can be drawn from God and from Mary's Immaculate Heart. The Lord's sacrifice is not in vain. Salvation is most certainly underway. God's Kingdom triumphs. There will be no more disagreement or division, for "the persecutor who accused our brothers day and night before our God," will be "brought down" (Rev 12:10). N.Q.

YEAR OF THE ROSARY

Rosary, powerful weapon against devil

by Fr. Gabriel Amorth

The recent Apostolic Letter of John Paul II, "Rosarium Virginis Mariae" (released last 16 Oct.) encourages all Christians to turn back to the prayer strongly recommended both by the latest Pontiffs and recent Marian apparitions. Paul VI called the Rosary a compendium of the Gospel. To make it more complete JP II added the 'mysteries of light' to cover Jesus' public life. Padre Pio called rosary beads a weapon of extraordinary power against Satan.

One day a colleague of mine heard the devil say during an exorcism: "Every Hail Mary is like a blow on my head. If Christians knew how powerful the Rosary were, it would be my end." The secret that makes this prayer so effective is that the Rosary is both prayer and meditation. It is addressed to the Father, to the Blessed Virgin, and to the Holy Trinity; and is a meditation centred on Christ. The Holy Father, in his RVM, points out that the Rosary is contemplative prayer in which one recalls Christ with Mary, one learns about Christ from Mary, one is conformed to Christ with Mary, one beseeches Christ with Mary, and one proclaims Christ with Mary.

Today more than ever the world is in need of prayer and meditation. It is in need of prayer because people have forgotten God, and without God the world has put itself on the edge of a precipice. This is why in her messages Our Lady insists so much on prayer. Without God's help Satan wins. The world is also in need of meditation because if the great Christian truths are forgotten, souls become void. This void is grabbed up by the enemy and he fills it with his lies. And today we see the results with widespread belief in superstition and occultism (black magic, seances, satanism..). The man of today very much needs to pause in silence and to reflect. Our noisy world is in need of prayerful silence. Even with a war looming over our heads, we believe in the power of prayer; we believe that the Rosary is stronger than the atomic bomb. Yes, prayer takes commitment and time, whereas today we want to do everything in a rush, especially God's things. Perhaps the Rosary, then, is what puts us on our guard about repeating Martha's error: "You worry about so many things, yet only one is needed..." (Lk 10:42). We risk doing the same thing. We worry and fret so much, even over things which are bad for us, while forgetting that the only thing we really need is to live with God. May the Queen of Peace open our eyes onto this reality before it is too late!

The most obvious danger for our society today is the downfall of the family. The rhythm of today's world has broken the family unity. Little time is spent together, and even when the family is together its members don't speak because the television speaks. Where are the families which recite the Rosary together in the evenings? Pope Pius XII insisted in his own time: "If you pray the Rosary together you will experience peace in your families, you will get on together." "The family that prays together, stays together," would say Peyton, the untiring apostle of the family Rosary. "Satan wants war," Mary said one day in Medjugorje. Well, the Rosary is the weapon which is able to guarantee peace for the world, because it is a prayer and a form of meditation able to transform hearts and defeat the enemy. * * *

"Happy are the peace makers" (Mt 5:9)

Yes, happy are we if we accept Jesus' call (from the Gospel according to St. Matthew). Happy are we if we accept that inherent need placed deep within every person "to make peace." How can we remain indifferent to the thousands upon thousands of people who

gathered in the cities' squares the world round – particularly on Saturday 15 February – to claim a good called PEACE which is a priority for everyone? It was a people of many colours: some were believers, some weren't, there were adults and children, and parents and religious. It was many-coloured like the "peace flag" with which many have lined their windows and balconies. Like many little rainbows, it reminds us of the rainbow God made for Noah as a sign of peace and of His unfailing covenant with mankind. The request for peace is born in the heart of man spontaneously, whenever he feels threatened by war, or death, or destruction, or misery or despair. God Himself places this yearning in the hearts of His children. Mostly this yearning is expressed in cries and protests in the name of whatever faith a person adheres to; be it political, religious, social, humanitarian...

However, if the seed planted by the Father is not buried in earth made fertile by prayer, it ends up like the one in the parable of the sower: the seed falls by the side of the road and is eaten up by birds. So if the request for peace is merely cried out in the squares without there also being a whisper in God's ear, the devil comes and steals it, he transforms it and uses it to his own advantage. Many would-be "peace-makers" therefore remain sterile preachers of pacifism. The starting point is the same for both, but the point of arrival is different. True peace-makers aim for God's heart; while the others aim at the big corporations. Least to say, the effect is quite different.

The Pope also suffers a great deal for this same cause, but he is also extremely determined in his efforts to attune the discordant voices so that the chant of peace might acquire harmony and effectively counter the breeding grounds for war which the world's "powerful" continuously stir up. The Holy Father doesn't lose an occasion to indicate the path of peace to all: "We must not give in, as though the war were inevitable... We must make every effort – there where we live – to see the others as brothers and sisters to be loved without reserve. This is the way which leads to peace; it is a journey of dialogue, of hope and of sincere reconciliation." In fact, the Pope doesn't fear to "beg for peace" – said Enzo Bianchi, prior of the ecumenical community of Bosé (NW Italy). He is indeed a beggar who lends his voice to the poor who yearn for peace, aware as he is that these are usually the first and oft only victims of war. The voice, then, of millions of people protesting in the streets can't be ignored. For the same reason, neither can the voice of a prophet named John Paul II be ignored. He reminds us that peace is fruit of our will to forgive and to testify with conviction to the "Gospel of peace."

S.C.

LENT is a time to reflect on the journey which led Jesus to the total donation of self. It was this donation that opened the way to the new life, to resurrection. On this way Mary is our teacher, for she was there with Him...

Mary is next to cross of love

The evangelist John, an eye witness, tells of the episode of Jesus' death, pointing out that "near the cross of Jesus stood his mother and his mother's sister, Mary the wife of Clopas, and Mary of Magdala" (Jn 19:25). Jesus' vision is foggy, his mind is lacerated by pain from the nails piercing his hands and feet; his breathing is made extremely difficult because of his position on the cross .. yet, all the same, Jesus is God! The Lord can see Mary's heart, he knows her feelings. He can see her there next to the cross, and he knows that she believes. Despite the "shock" of Calvary, Mary holds onto the certainty that GOD IS LOVE! She can see this love; with the loving glance of a mother, she sees this love nailed to a cross ... and she believes! Jesus' last divine gesture was to say to his mother: "Woman, this is your son!" (Jn 19:26). He was saying: "Mother, I know you believe in God's omnipotence. I know you understand the sense of what is happening. You know that God responds with love to the slimy river of man's sin. So allow me to take your motherhood and give it as a gift of love. You are my gift to mankind; you, a sign of love within my love.. Woman, this is your son."

What a marvellous scene! What a moving scene! From this moment on a true disciple of Jesus cannot do without Mary, for Mary is a gift of Jesus, a gift from the cross! At this point Jesus can exclaim: "all is accomplished" (Jn 19:30). In other words, "I have said all there is to say on love; I have given all my love; I have revealed God's mystery! Now I await the response of love from men. This response is possible, for from this moment on men have the gift of fire that burns within God's heart. It is the gift of the Holy Spirit!" In fact, John refers this important detail: "And bowing his head he gave up his spirit" (Jn 19:30). Such is the beginning of the story of holiness. It is a wonderful story that takes us down the centuries passing through the lives of many, many saints who accepted the gift of the Spirit and lit up the night of the world."

Mons. Angelo Comastri,

bishop of Loreto

(taken from "La firma di Dio")

Living the mysteries of sorrow

In many of the Pope's discourses he has invited us not to "waste suffering," but rather to exploit it as a condition in which one is more easily able to encounter the suffering face of Christ "who takes upon himself the sicknesses of man and of mankind." Also this year, on the XI World Day of the Sick (11 February, feast of Our Lady of Lourdes) the Holy Father appealed to all those who carry the heavy crosses of physical or mental sicknesses to offer their suffering for the good of mankind, and in particular for the cause of peace. The Holy Father stressed the closeness of Our Lady of Lourdes to the sick and suffering., pointing out how she is a constant reference for them since in her hands she holds rosary beads.

"Dear Sick People, the Rosary offers the Christian response to the problem of suffering, drawing it from the Easter mystery of Christ. Those who pray follow, with Mary, the whole itinerary of life and faith, an itinerary that has as an integral part of human suffering, that in Christ becomes divine-human suffering, the saving Passion."

Not an easy task, but it is surely possible for those who wish to follow Christ: "The power through which Christ overcame the dominion of evil and healed the human person is his confident surrender in an attitude of filial submission to the Father's will." This same attitude operates in us, he said, "thanks to the Holy Spirit, when, in the experience of sickness, we travel with Mary the way of the sorrowful mysteries." John Paul II also pointed out how "those who carry the cross with Jesus offer an eloquent witness to those who are unable to believe or to hope." Redaz.

All women are mothers

Just as Christ is the manifestation of real man, Mary, His Mother, is the revelation of woman and mother.

Thanks to this revelation, all women, especially mothers, are similar to the Mother of God, and participate in her dignity, power, motherhood and honour.

All women are mothers; for they give life to mankind, without which mankind would be inhuman.

They give life to mankind with their love, their beauty and their fondness; and they nurture it with generosity and goodness.

Without the woman-mother, the world would be more of a wilderness than the desert and colder than ice.

God chose the mother as his direct helper, and with her He continued the work of creation of man and of the world.

When man, with his sin, broke the vital bond with God, God chose woman as his helper for the work of salvation (Gen. 3:15).

Without mothers, the world would be imperfect, and man would have remained dust, or to it he would have ignobly returned.

Br. Ljudevit Rupcic

How do we respond to God?

One of the most fundamental passages in our journey of holiness is the death of the old man and the birth of the new creature. The perspective in itself is truly marvellous, yet it takes on our part an unconditioned yes to God's will. We ask ourselves: where in our soul is our response to the Father, to the Son and to the Holy Spirit manifested? How can we verify the state of our response? True verification is had only when we find ourselves before the unknown, the impossible, just as Mary did at the moment of the Annunciation. In these circum-stances we will understand if we are ready to die to ourselves and our own ways of thinking, to allow God to manifest His almighty power.

We ask ourselves again: in situations of provocation and surprise, how does our soul respond? If we are ready to offer our yes in these situations and accept the test, they become for us opportunity to be born again as new creatures. However, we can be frightened by it all and by our own sense of incapacity and inadequacy. But God didn't leave us alone; to help us in our rebirth He gave us a Mother, Mary, who generates in us the divine life. That is why our relationship with Mary must be more than superficial devotion. It needs to be accompanied by a constant inner seeking of her womb, for it is there that we are spiritually conceived. And it is in her virginal womb that we must encounter God; for it was fecundated, sanctified and glorified by Him. In other words, we must remain in Mary's heart; and this means to take upon ourselves her virtues. But this isn't imitation of them, by pretending to be humble and devoted; it means to immerse oneself in the power of the Holy Spirit, to live according to Mary's humility and her capacity to listen. The Holy Spirit needs this humility; He needs our obedience, our tranquillity, our surrender, our trust, our love and our readiness. God doesn't need philosophical treatises or human reasoning and means. All God needs is our readiness. And for this we need Mary's virtues; and what are these if not gifts of the Holy Spirit? If our yes to God is said with trust, surrender and serenity, it becomes vitality for our soul. Think of a bud in springtime. The sun gives it warmth and light and it begins to unfold and to blossom. Our yes to God must be a vital yes; it must reach down into the depths of our very being. The fruits of this yes will not delay; they will be marked by simplicity, by inner silence, by the ability to listen and by love.

Even at the foot of the cross, Mary's heart was open, without reserve. She was obedient and surrendered to the end, just as her Son was. At a time when there was nothing but death, Mary continued to be the Mother who loved God's life, and she forgot all else to seek this life. Our rebirth also comes about through trials, for it is in trials that our yes to God is seen as it really is: complete or just partial surrender.

Tommaso di Francesco

"Return to primitive fervour"

WAY OF SURRENDER

by Giuseppe Ferraro

The Queen of Peace did not appear in Medjugorje to supply the world with unpublished revelations, or to accomplish new signs or announce sensational theological news. She came to lead us, to take us by the hand, just as she did with the beloved disciple whom Jesus placed in her care at the foot of the cross, so we can "see with our own eyes, and contemplate and touch" (Jn 1-2) - with the senses of our soul - the "Word of life" which was "with God" (idem). The Word who became visible for us is Jesus of Nazareth, Son of the Most High, whom Mary generated in us "in the fullness of time."

Still today Mary desires re-generating Him in the souls of her Children. Yes! for it is only through the contemplation of Christ's suffering and glorified Face, and through experiencing the ineffable mystery of Christ, with the freedom and trust of a child, that one is able to surrender to the Father's tender love expressed in his paschal journey of humiliation and glory. And it is this surrender which makes it possible for one to accept the river of new, divine life which breaks out over the world through Jesus Christ, crucified by men but eternally glorified by God.

This is why Our Lady so stresses the fundamental spiritual step of surrender. It is both an essential and a necessary condition for entering into communion with the Life of the Father, and is truly pleasing to God: ".. He doesn't desire anything from you except your surrender" (Message 25 May 1989). It is the only spiritual way by which we are able to fully experience Christ's paschal mystery, and which can radically destroy - through obedience of the faith - the poison from the original sin hidden deeply in the human heart. The original sin - a child of rebellion and blameworthy mistrust in God's provident fatherhood – has its poisonous root in every sin and in "every loss and worry" which troubles mankind and creation. It continually generates in the hearts of men permanent spiritual wounds, and leaves hearts full of anxiety and despair. From these ailments Our Lady desires freeing her Children in a definite manner - thanks to the mystery of grace which gushes forth from the heart of God who is "rich in mercy." The path of grace proposed by Mary is the way of surrender to God without reserve through Her Immaculate Heart. It expresses the same faith as Abraham's which was "reckoned to him as righteousness" (Rm 4:3). Not by chance, the onset of the work of salvation of the world began in him.

In the journey of spiritual surrender we definitely encounter the tree of life and the light of the new heavens and new earth, but it also requires a radical inner self-shedding and the

renouncement of all dependence on the variegated "pantheon" of idols which encumber the hearts of people of our day. The thick network of illusory attachments and false worldly securities obscure the faith and open the way to perilous areas where the father of lies is active. "Dear Children, I invite you to surrender to God. In this time (Lent) I especially desire that you renounce those things to which you are attached and which damage your spiritual life" (25 Feb. '90).

Real spiritual self-shedding can't be achieved without a radical decision for God; without an unconditioned "yes" offered to the Father through Mary's Immaculate Heart, and continually renewed with Her and through Her in the practical side of our daily lives, and both in the little and big trials which the Lord in His wisdom places on our path. These trials help strengthen our offer of surrender and help us become true instruments of His sacrificial love for the salvation of the world, so that we participate ever more fully in the victory of the Immaculata over every trap set by the prince of darkness: "Therefore, my Children, decide totally for God, and do not let Satan enter into your lives through those things which damage you and your spiritual life" (idem). An unconditioned decision for God is, nonetheless, fruit of grace which God grants in response to a persevering, deep prayer expressed in a live and unceasing contact of the soul with the mystery of God's life present in us and the universe. "My Children, God offers Himself to you in full and you will discover Him and know Him only through prayer. Thus, decide for prayer" (25.2.'90). It is then that we will begin to perceive ever more clearly the signs of God's response, the warming glow of a fullness of life which brings with it "that immense joy and peace that only God can give" (25.3.'89). (To be continued)

Recognize God's mark in everything

Live your day-to-day life to the full; immerse yourself in it, and discover the presence of God there. Discover His action, His voice, His thought in all those things which you take for granted. It is precisely in the things which stand out less that His love is impressed; that love so deep and so intimate of the Creator for His creatures. It is impressed in the life of every day, hidden in the life of many, in the corners of our daily lives. Discover that God speaks to you personally in a language that only you can understand (because it makes up part of your secrets, your desires, your imagination, your way of seeing things..) Recognize in events which at first seem meaningless that invisible thread which connects them and gives them importance; as though they were many words put together to make up a message from God for us. This is called contemplation.

You don't need special gifts, then, to see God, because the Father comes to all His children. All you need do is work out how. Shed the idea that contemplation is destined solely for those who work at mastering self-discipline by detaching themselves from the world and its materialistic regulations. True contemplative souls are called precisely to discover the Lord's tracks in the little things that surround them. So not an ecstatic vision will reveal

God's face, but the attention we give to all that surrounds us, particularly to the things we overlook because we deem them "too ordinary." How many times have we realized, upon receiving something "casually," that it was something we'd needed? And what about when we feel down, don't we receive words that console and give new strength from those around us and even from strangers? And how often have we seen our own projects destroyed only to see that things are put back into place in a way we'd never hoped for, making things even better? The list is long, we could go on, but the important thing is that we become aware that the plot of our lives is woven by God and God alone. Just open the eyes of your heart; just live in an attitude of constant contemplation, and discover that God has left His mark

Stefania Consoli

Black Madonna, how sweet it is to be your child!

On the 25th January 1945, during the invasion of Russia into Poland, in a concentration camp near Poznan, a Cossack guard wanted to kill me when he saw my hat (I belonged to the Italian Alpine division). He had, in fact, sworn to kill all the Italian "Alpines" because in 1943, together with the Germans, they destroyed his hometown.

He grabbed me by the front of my jacket and pointed his gun at my head as he pushed me up against the wall at the front of the camp. In the wall, just over my head, was an image (made of majolica) of Our Lady of Czestochova. He looked at it and stopped. He placed his gun back in his belt, and slapping me, he slammed me down into the snow. A Pole whom I already knew, Marian Kaczmarek, tried to defend me, and then he said: "Rienzi (Polish for Lorenzo), the Queen of Poland, Our Lady of Czestochova, has saved you. Be grateful to Her!" After 11 years I converted and became a missionary. I was ordained a priest in 1962 and since 1969 I've lived in Congo where I run a centre for disabled children. In 1977 during a visit to Italy I heard about a group of cyclists who were planning to ride to Czestochova and I asked if I could join them. That was how, 32 years later, I got to pay my debt to Our Lady. On my way there I rang my friend Marian to ask him to meet me at the famous Shrine. Together we prayed lengthily to the Black Madonna.

Fr. Lorenzo Caselin,
Xaverian Missionary, Bukavu

News from the blessed land

MARIJANA INTERVIEWED

"Prayer group lives on in my heart"

Besides the six visionaries of Medjugorje, Our Lady manifested herself through the gift of "inner locutions" to two young girls, Jelena and Marijana Vasilj. The two friends are now both married. To them Our Lady gave messages for the formation and growth of the prayer group which the Gospa herself desired. In an interview, MARIJANA tells of her memories, but she also tells how the gift she received as a small child is today bearing mature fruits in her spiritual and family life. Q. Marijana, a long time has passed since Our Lady spoke to your heart to guide the prayer group. What does it mean to you?

Marijana &endash; To be exact, the prayer group hasn't finished. Even though there was a lengthy period of time during which many weren't participating anymore, there were still a dozen of us who continued to meet and pray together. Today too, however, Medjugorje is in need of a young people's group guided by a priest; just as Fr. Tomislav did for us.

Q. Over the years you've lived a quiet life to dedicate yourself to your husband and children. More lately, however, you've been witnessing ever more frequently.

M. &endash; Yes, that's true, but I also needed the time to "absorb" the quantity and intensity of my experience as a young girl. And in any case, I felt the need to give priority to my family, particularly in the early years of our life together. These days families live quite a superficial existence where work comes before anything else, and everything is done in a rush; and they manage to do everything except pray. But why should this happen when Our Lady says that prayer should come first? It is normal when people don't give prayer importance that they don't find the time to pray... Their priorities are wrong: first do this, then do that, then maybe pray.. but of course the time is never found to pray! Instead, Our Lady told us so many times to begin the day with prayer so that everything else might continue in peace and harmony. We need to pray so God can give us strength, discernment and the will to accept whatever the day serves up to us, including unforeseen circumstances which occur frequently enough. If we let ourselves be accompanied by God's blessing, all else is easier to bear.

Q. Is that what you do in your family?

M. &endash; Yes, especially in our prayer with the children. Many times Our Lady has said that today's families have problems with their children, precisely because they don't pray. You can't expect young people to pray when they're 18 or 20 if they've never done it

or seen their parents do it! Instead, if parents set the example, prayer becomes normal for them. That is why it is important to pray with your children, so that they understand that prayer is a moment of communion. In the morning, each of us prays on his own, but in the evening we pray together; we recite the Rosary, and it's my children who are always anxious to begin. I'm convinced that if children learn to pray when they're young, they will find their way in life more easily and they'll have the strength to face all life's difficulties. I think that this certainty and the decision to pray in the family is a fruit of the prayer group.

Q. How much importance do you give to spontaneous prayer which Our Lady strongly advised for the group?

M. &endash; Yes, She did advise we use it. In many messages Our Lady spoke of spontaneous prayer, and right from the beginning people asked what it was, particularly when they saw that children practised it. Our Lady advised we use this form of prayer especially when praying with others, because when you express your feelings out loud others come to know what it is important to pray for. So expressing publicly our inner feelings is a sign of openness to accept God and to others.

It wasn't always easy, especially at the beginning when Our Lady reproached us for our closed hearts. You see, none of us wanted to speak up; we lacked the courage to say out loud what we felt at the moment. Slowly, however, we got used to it with help from Mary who called spontaneous prayer "talking with God." She would also say that prayer isn't automatically repeating the Our Father and Hail Mary &endash; which is what often happens with the prayer of the Rosary &endash; but that between mysteries we should reflect on Jesus' life and pray spontaneously.

Q. Spontaneous prayer was one of the pillars of your meetings, wasn't it?

M. &endash; That's what Our Lady wanted. She taught us to begin and conclude the meetings always with spontaneous prayer. At the beginning we would express our prayer intentions, and at the end we would give thanks. In fact, in one message Our Lady said that people often know how to pray but that they rarely give thanks. We have to learn to give thanks even for little things, so that we know how to give thanks also for the big things. I think this method gave greater openness and more depth to our prayer. Of course, at the end we would pray to ask for God's blessing upon all mankind, and especially upon the young people.

Q. How did Our Lady guide the group? When would the messages come?

M. &endash; Generally Our Lady gave the message to me while I was still at home, before going to the prayer meeting; but sometimes She gave it to Jelena. I would pray, and then her words would come to me which would be used to begin the meeting. At the end of the

meeting Our Lady gave a message to Jelena. It was usually briefer and included the final blessing. At times it would also happen that throughout the meeting Jelena would receive a message with a theme that we would use to discuss. To do this we would split up into smaller groups, as that made it easier to open up our hearts. Then at the end a representative of the group would refer our conclusions to the others.

Q. So Our Lady's interventions changed according to the circumstances ...

M. &endash; Yes, there was never a set time for Her to come (as She does with the six visionaries). Time had no value, but it is important to stress that the messages came only when we were praying. Fr. Tomislav told us straight away that we had the gift of prayer. Our Lady had warned us that we would not have this gift for all our lives; but to me it seems that the gift has remained within us in a kind of way. Even if we don't receive daily messages anymore, or feel Our Lady's presence as we did, we do have prayer as a life-long gift.

Q. Regrets or nostalgia?

M. &endash; I often think that if we had remained closer to the group, or rather, to that type of prayer ... that is, if everything had remained the same, then perhaps Our Lady would have continued speaking to us. But let me say again that I have never stopped praying, especially in the family... but everything is different. I understand, however, that God's plans aren't always ours and that they can't be changed.

Q. How long were you asked to stay at the "school of prayer"?

M. &endash; Our Lady asked us to stay together for four years to have the time to know each other better, and make it easier for us to open our hearts. People around us didn't understand and found it hard to accept. They would ask what need there was of a prayer group, and why it had to last four years. We would reply that if they were in the group they'd understand. I don't know why it had to be exactly four years. It was Our Lady's desire that we stay till the end without deciding anything for our future. All we had to do was be present, and She herself guided us with a series of messages which in a kind of way were connected. We were called to be constant and faithful, and this stopped us from committing that bad habit typical of groups, where you go once and then you don't go for maybe five times. Like that you lose everything! If you meet a person, then you don't see him (or her) for two months how can you get to know each other? Like that you never open your heart.

Q. So what do you suggest to prayer groups that want to learn the art of profound prayer?

M. &endash; If you want to grow together you must stay together for a certain length of

time so that you learn to open up by praying and sharing.

With us Our Lady wanted us to meet first once a week, then twice, then three times. She didn't ask for everything at once, but gradually, step by step. However, the third of our weekly meetings – on Saturdays – was mostly dedicated to sharing our experiences and the messages she gave us. This is because the messages aren't the same for everyone; each of us saw it in his own way, so that through sharing we were enriched and helped by each other's opinions.

Q. We know that Our Lady indicated Fr. Tomislav as the group's spiritual guide. How often did you meet with him?

M. – At the beginning Fr. Tomislav was always present as a real guide. It was Our Lady who asked for the presence of a priest, because we were little girls – 10 and 11 years old – and we didn't have the faintest idea how to start up a group or what to do. At the time Jelena asked why we needed a priest to guide the group, and Our Lady replied that a group without a priest is like a class without a teacher, especially at the beginning. So Fr. Tomislav accepted and organized it all. I think he is the only true witness of what happened at the beginning.

Q. So you were children, but then you grew up. How much has the "gift" influenced your personal development?

M. – I'm often asked that. Well, we grew up with this "gift", so everything was sort of natural. We were privileged by the fact that families here were all believers prior to the apparitions. Practically everyone believed and everyone prayed. Our Lady told the visionaries once that She chose Medjugorje precisely because of the faith of this people. That's why the things that happened here didn't seem so odd. Of course, thanks to the messages we also understood that the faith of the people here wasn't strong, but was rather practised as a tradition. Nonetheless, it was a good base to start from.

Q. How does an adolescent live with such a great gift?

M. - It wasn't always easy, particularly during our adolescent years, when we saw how our friends were free to do as they wish while we had to be at the disposal of pilgrims and the group, etc. - and perhaps we felt a little envious. So ours was a gift but also a sacrifice. Still, I have a wonderful memory of it and I'd never change it for anything, because it was also a great responsibility, like that of the visionaries - and they haven't had a private life for over 20 years. If we accept the great gifts from God we have to be ready to give everything that is expected of us. We are only instruments through which Mary gives her messages to the world. We have to do this not only with our words but also through our example. It's the same for pilgrims who mustn't think their pilgrimage is over once they get

back home. Our Lady said that they have to continue with prayer and fasting so that their witness isn't just word of mouth, but that it be seen through the changes they experience in their lives as a fruit of their pilgrimage.

Q. Some are surprised that Our Lady should repeat the same things. What do you think?

M. &endash; We're surprised that Our Lady repeats the same things, but who of us can say that they put her messages into practice? Who is it that prays for three hours a day, or fasts twice a week? Nearly no one! The Mother of God doesn't repeat the same things without reason. She would like us to fulfil her wishes. She wouldn't have to repeat them if we all put them into practice, would She?

Q. What do you think about the duration of the apparitions?

M. &endash; All these years Our Lady has been appearing at Medjugorje, and there is no doubt that this is a great sign for mankind. At times I reflect and think that here in Medjugorje something special for the world, something new should happen, because the world has to begin again; it has to go back to God. Around us, we hear only negative things: on TV, in the papers, in people's conversations... They never say anything that brings us joy, and I think it's because their object of discussion is always something that's far from God, material things. There's no spirit, no love, no peace.

Q. You mean that Medjugorje must become a place not only where you pray, but where you can contemplate God?

M. &endash; In a message Our Lady told us that we ought to be aware that God is with us, that He's inside us, not in the clouds. When we will eventually comprehend this and begin to pray in this perspective, all will change. At the beginning of our experience, Mary called us to go out into nature and to discover God's presence there. Then we had to try writing or sharing our experiences, our feelings. Obviously, it wasn't an "outing," for we had to immerse ourselves in God's creation all the while thinking that God had prepared it for us, so we could enjoy it and give Him glory.

Q. Our Lady chooses to appear amid nature. Do you think She's trying to tell us something?

M. &endash; I'm certain. She would often tell us how important it is to feel God's presence in the silence and peace of nature. Today this dimension is lost, and it is one of mankind's problems. People don't notice what's around them; they just see what's ahead of them and they start racing towards it. Then they lack time and peace. They want everything, but they end up with nothing. It's so stupid! What's the sense of accumulating material goods that remain, while we're destined to leave? The Gospa told us many times that the things of this

world are fleeting, and that we should never forget it. This life of ours is merely a preparation for eternal life. So we should stop looking at what others do. Others might want to rush and accumulate stress, but we mustn't lose our identity. Man is never happy: the more he's got, the more he thinks he hasn't got.

Q. And to conclude?

M. &endash; With the words of a rather interesting book that I recently read. The author recalls a dream. In his dream he interviewed God. He first asked God if He had time for the interview. God smiled and replied: my time is eternity. Another question was what surprised Him about man, to which God replied: I'm surprised that they're always in a hurry. They never think about the present, but about what will happen in the future, and they end up living neither the present nor the future. And He added: It's surprising how man lives as though he never had to die, and he dies as though he had never lived!

(Marijana Vasilj, interview by Stefania Consoli)

VICKA IS MOTHER

Congratulations to Vicka and Mario on the arrival of little Marija Sofia (born 13th January). May God bless their little daughter and keep her! We take this opportunity to wish all new mothers every blessing, that they might be courageous witnesses to life which is a gift from God. And to Our Lady's embrace we entrust all the little newborns and their families, especially those who suffer.

Christ's outstretched arms

are the wings with which

the Father sends peace

to the world

In this year dedicated to the Rosary how can we forget all the times that Our Lady, Queen of Peace, has urged us to pray the Rosary? To the prayer group which She herself guided through "inner locutions" given to Jelena and Marjana, Mary gave messages to teach the group the secrets of profound prayer so they would know how to be open to the Holy Spirit: "Dear Children, become "one" with my Son and He will fulfil your every desire. Not only because Jesus grants so, but you yourselves will comprehend more clearly. The more a person is open the more he is able to receive. Thus, when you pray ask for light for the way so you can understand God's will. Pray for peace, and for love in your hearts. May every person be dear to you; do everything for Jesus' sake and for love of Him, for He died for you all. And you do the same: do not spare your own lives. Don't be selfish and don't keep the graces for yourselves, but pray that God might show you the right way to help others. Your main task is to bring the lost sheep back to their place, back to the fold. Therefore, pray that God might light your way."

The Rosary, a journey of conversion

by Jelena Vasilj

Many people learn to hold the rosary beads in their hands only after having been to Medjugorje. It is this first contact with the beads that enables many to come in "touch" with Mary's love for them. Hers is a love which releases that mysterious mechanism called conversion. It is true contact; it is the manifestation of a presence which is mediated by the prayer of the Rosary. Learning to hold the beads one learns to hold Mary by the hand, and together with Her one learns to journey along the way. This journey is one of joy, sorrow, glory and light; and inevitably leads to her Son Jesus. Mary accompanies us along the way - a way which She also journeyed along &endash; to teach us, and as our teacher She continually urges us along and guides our steps. It can be said that the Rosary is a synthesis of our faith. When praying the Rosary a Christian's ears are perked, as it were to say, so as to allow Mary to teach him the mysteries of Christ's life that only She knew. Each time is a proclamation of the "Mystery" or kerigma. It is as though we allow each time for the Gospel to be proclaimed to us. In short, the Rosary is Our Lady's preferred instrument for the new evangelisation. We contemplate the Rosary, and at the same time it stirs up wonder within us. It causes a sense of awe to swell up within us, making our gaze move from the journey and to begin concentrating on what is in Mary. Our Lady becomes the object of our attention, so that we don't just contemplate the Rosary with Her, but also in Her.

Each "Hail Mary" that we say thus becomes a proclamation of the Mystery incarnated in Her; the Mystery of our salvation which She lives within herself. Thus Mary becomes the "cause of our happiness." This attitude, which may seem difficult, is fundamental in prayer. Each person must be able to say: "I can feel that the Mystery has come to me and it

lifts me from my daily anguish caused by my own littleness or that of the others." It is a Mystery - Mary is witness – that not only comes to me, but wants to be me. Just like the Blessed Virgin, I too am called to be a mother of the Mystery which desires being incarnated in me. So that through continuous contemplation and pondering with the heart, Mary (our Mother) generates the Word of God, Jesus, in us. This is what we should achieve with the Rosary. 'Tis God's desire to be united with us; He becomes flesh of Mary's flesh to form a union with mankind. This union changes our humanity - not in a magical way, but through the glorious cross – into an image or icon of God. "Be perfect just as your Father is perfect," St. Paul says.

The first step is to recite the Rosary. The worst of Rosaries is, in any case, the one that is not said. We must have the courage to close off the many voices inside of us that call out for our attention. We can present them to God at the beginning of our prayer and let God enlighten us also on these; and let Him take us from worry to perfect peace. Once peace in God is reached the soul will enjoy the presence of its Creator and will relax in it. How much more profitable is our work, and our relationships, after having rested in prayer! While praying the Rosary it is good to read the Holy Scripture since the essence of each mystery is found in it, but it is also true that the heart of each mystery is merely an anticipation of it all; so that not only does the Holy Scripture help us pray the Rosary, but the Rosary reveals the Scriptures. Lastly, it can be said that the Rosary is a prayer not only of communion with God, but also with others. With the alternation of voices in the prayer of the Rosary, we have what is similar to a choir of many voices which lift up to God as a single voice, representing a sign of unity. In fact, Our Lady desires that we pray the Rosary especially in the family in the morning or the evening. So, in our prayer let's implore from God love for the Rosary. And from Mary, Queen of the Holy Rosary, let's ask that She help us discover its glories.

* * *

Greetings from Vietnam!

Dear Friends of the "Echo of Mary,"

I thought you might be glad to receive news from a reader in Vietnam. I've been receiving the Echo regularly for some years now, even though I'm unable to send a donation. In the silence of my heart I bless you continually for the gesture of generosity and trust in my regards. I keep you all in my heart and in my prayers. Here I am, nearly 80, and despite the aches and pains, I'm still very much Mary's child, anxious to enter eternal life. Deo gratias! The Gospa of Medjugorje gives me so much joy and love. She took me into her service in 1993, if I remember well. At the time a priest friend of mine gave me a book (in English) called *The Visions of the Children*, by Janice T. Connell, asking me to help him with a translation into Vietnamese. A few days later I called him to say I would; and there we were at work on a book which would introduce the events of Medjugorje into Vietnam! That was how Gospa enrolled us in her army. At the moment various books and leaflets

make their way silently and secretly into the least expected places and along mysterious ways to reach the Vietnamese Christian community. Just recently, a Vietnamese bishop, Msgr. Tuyen, went on pilgrimage to Medjugorje and was very impressed. Msgr. Tuyen is a disciple of Cardinal Pham Dinh Thun, presently Archbishop of Hanoi.

Four years after deciding to translate the book, the Cardinal met us and blessed our Medjugorje apostolate. He even suggested we put together a booklet of all the Gospa's messages (in Vietnamese, of course); and I think this booklet is what makes the Blessed Mother the happiest given that it is Her desire that the messages be known and put into practice. Therefore, my friends, can you imagine the joy every time a new edition of Echo is dropped into my mailbox?! It's one of our Blessed Mom's miracles, and I await this miracle every two months. But even more so, it always comes at a moment when Her motherly message is a response to one of my needs, or as comfort in a moment of suffering, or a solution to a problem, or again a blessing for a choice I'd made. Many times I've kissed the contents of your publication, and gone down on my knees to read the Marian message, for it truly is word from heaven. The last edition of Echo talks of the Apostolic Letter on the Rosary. Truly wonderful, my friends!

No doubt it's a Letter without precedents in Church History. It's a full expression of John Paul II's "Totus tuus" and a witness of his love for the Blessed Virgin. I see the Pope as always having the Rosary in his hands as he contemplates, together with Mary, the radiant face of Christ; and with Her he sustains Christianity and the entire world. How She must love this beloved son of Hers when he chants the praises of the Rosary with that tone of his which is like that of a VISIONARY!

After this Apostolic Letter we need to look upon the Rosary with new eyes. Each mystery should be prayed as though we were participating at a manifestation of God. At least this is the lesson that I drew from JP II's choice of the mysteries of light; and I feel certain that Our Lady has a part in it. Just recently, that friend of mine whom I mentioned previously, published a booklet entitled: "Living Mary's Messages." Each message is followed by a comment taken most of the times from Echo or from one of the various writings on the Virgin of Medjugorje. The aim of this booklet is that the messages aren't read as though we were horsemen "riding through a field in flower" and once through it all is forgotten; for we have to go over it again. This is what Our Lady recommends. Please pray for me so that our apostolate here in Vietnam might bear fruits ever more abundantly for the children of the Queen of Peace."

Our readers write...

Messalina, Italy – Echo is truly wonderful, it's like receiving a letter from our Blessed Mother! May the Lord bless you and keep you always, that Echo might continue to quench the thirsty hearts of the Lord's little sheep.

Sr. M. Bernadette, Rome ‐ As a nun I read your Echo with great interest. For the many years that I've been receiving Echo, it has been a wonderful help for my spiritual growth. I like to hand it on to others as I'm sure that devotion to Mary will save the world.

Rosa Orsetto, Australia ‐ Though I'm old and sick, I love to receive your Echo. When I've finished I pass it on to others who also appreciate it. God bless you all.

Julianna Malaspina, Australia ‐ Please keep sending us our beloved Echo, in Italian and in English. We so appreciate it! Please accept my donation.

Lydia Deangelis, Australia ‐ I receive Echo both in English and in Italian for our two prayer groups. We all enjoy reading it and passing it on to people who can't afford it. We enclose a donation; I just hope that you will continue sending it to us. God bless you!

Mrs. Whitten, Australia ‐ Thank you for faithfully sending me the Echo. When I've finished I pass it on to a friend of mine, and when she's finished she passes it on to others in her family. I am in my 80's and I find inspiration, hope and peace in the beautiful reading and lessons therein. Echo leads me to more prayer and renews my faith. God is good.

John Rayment, Australia ‐ Thank you for continuing to send me Echo all these years. It is a great comfort and support to my Catholic faith. I enclose a donation for my subscription.

Fr. Carlo Mondini, Argentina ‐ I'm writing from my new mission in the far north of Argentina, and I thank you for continuing to send me your Echo. It is always useful to read Our Lady's messages and the comments, and other news on Medjugorje. I went there three years ago, prior to coming to Argentina, and your publication brings with it the same atmosphere of prayer and holiness that I experienced in that land blessed by Our Lady.

Sr. Lydwina, Belfast ‐ We so value your publication! May Jesus and Mary bless your work for God's glory! I've enclosed a donation to cover costs...

Rev. Morris, Rep. S. Africa ‐ Thank you for your wonderful newsletter. I hope that it will go from strength to strength... Enclosed is a donation ...

Fr. S. John, India ‐ I found a copy of your Echo amongst other Catholic journals passed onto me, and I found it inspirational and a help to my missionary ministry. I'd like to be on your mailing list. I can't send a donation, but I promise to celebrate Holy Masses for your intentions.

Bernadette and Trevor, New Zealand ‐ We've been receiving Echo for many

years, and we think it is a wonderful spiritual gift which spreads the good news from Medjugorje. Enclosed is a donation to continue our subscription.

G. Anakwue, Lagos Nigeria &endash; I wish to congratulate you all for your profound determination to spread our Mother's Message of Rosary and Peace. I've been receiving copies of Echo regularly for over ten years. Though I cannot make a financial contribution, I shall continue to pray for your success. I have been spiritually rejuvenated by Our Mother's messages.

Sr. Hadburg, Germany &endash; I wish to thank you for sending me Echo over the years. It is so informative and rich in blessings. I love to share it with others.

Renate, Germany &endash; It was with great joy that I received a copy of your Echo at a prayer meeting. I want to support you with my prayer and with a donation.

Sr. Nellie Margate, Papua New Guinea &endash; Congratulations for sharing with us your time, reflections and your publication. They are very enriching and helpful in our journey of faith. I usually integrate your reflections in our different formation programmes. I pass around the copy I receive to other missionaries and sometimes we discuss further your reflections in relation to our present situation. Through the Echo of Mary we are led closer to Jesus, Who is our Way, our Truth and our Light!

On the anniversary of FR. ANGELO MUTTI's death (3 March 2000) we pray that "his" Echo might continue to spread the blessing of the Queen of Peace to the world, particularly now that in heaven he can intercede directly before God. We have often experienced how difficulties - which never lack - are easily and quickly resolved when entrusted to his intercession. Thank you, Fr. Angelo!

With fraternal and filial affection,
the Staff of Echo

"Our weapons for the spiritual battle are: prayer, fasting and love. May Fr. Angelo, whom we recall on this third anniversary, intercede for all the readers of Echo, that in these 40 days (of Lent) they might find the renewed vitality and light of Baptism. God bless us."

Villanova M., 8 March 2003

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Our Prayers for you!

We invite you all to join in our prayers which we offer up to God on the first Saturday of each month. On this day we shall pray for the intentions of readers (these may be expressed within the silence of your hearts and offered up in prayer; it is not necessary that they be written down and forwarded to us). Once a month Fr. Alberto will also celebrate a Holy Mass for the same intentions.

Echo is a free publication. Donations are gratefully accepted; without them we cannot continue to spread Mary's Message of Peace to her little children around the world.

Ways of donating:

* Make personal cheques payable to "Echo of Mary Association" and mail to same at: Casella Postale 27, I-31030 Bessica Treviso, Italy; or if convenient, pay into one of our bank accounts, specifying payment for "Echo of Mary Association"

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!! Readers in Australia / Oceania. Echo is now posted from Italy. Please now write to us to keep your subscriptions up to date, to submit your donations, and for any other correspondence.

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