

**INSTITUTE OF SPIRITUALITY AND RELIGIOUS FORMATION
TANGAZA COLLEGE
CATHOLIC UNIVERSITY OF EASTERN AFRICA**

**THE SPIRITUAL MOTHERHOOD OF MARY IN THE LIGHT
OF JOHN'S GOSPEL**

Its Application to the Cottolengo Contemplative Sisters in the Third Millennium

SR. JACINTA MWOTHIRU M., SSJBC

TUTOR
REV. DR. GEORGE KOCHOLICKAL, SDB

APRIL 2005

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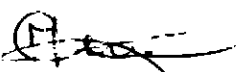
REV. DR. GEORGE KOCHOLICKAL, SDB

*This is a Long Essay Submitted in Partial Fulfillment
of the Requirements for a Diploma in Religious Formation*

APRIL 2005

DECLARATION

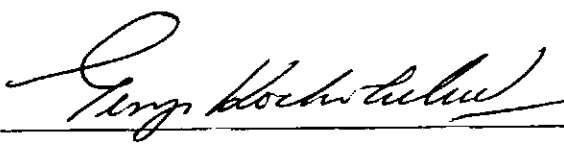
I, the undersigned, declare that this long essay is my original work achieved through my personal reading, scientific research method and critical reflections. It is submitted in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the Diploma in Religious Formation. It has never been submitted to any other college or university for academic credit. All sources have been cited in full and acknowledged.

Signed:  _____

Name of Student: Sr. Jacinta Mwothiru M., SSJBC

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This long essay has been submitted for examination with my approval as the college supervisor.

Signed:  _____

Name of Supervisor: Rev. Dr. George Kocholickal, SDB

Date: 18/03/2005

I gladly dedicate this essay to my biological mother Julia Peter and to my venerated spiritual mothers – my elder sisters of Cottolengo Monastery, Tuuru. Their faithful and joyful dedication to God and to their numerous “children,” a dedication graced by that feminine *Sophia* (that inner wisdom, that mother’s nurturing and love) that is typical of every true mother, is both edifying and challenging to me. With Mary, our Mother par excellence, they are my expert mentors in the sublime art of mothering.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENT

“A king’s secret it is prudent to keep, but the works of God are to be declared and made known” (Tobit 12:7). Therefore, I wish to mention the works of God and thank Him for his unconditional love that I have deeply experienced through the people who have helped me in the process of writing this essay.

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My deep gratitude goes to Sr. Carla F., Superior of M. Nasi community and to all my sisters of this community. I have deeply experienced their love and appreciation. Since I cannot mention each one by name given the space limits, to all who helped me in one way or another, I assure you a special place and space in my heart and prayer. May the good Lord, through Mary’s intercession, reward you as lavishly as he alone can, in time and in eternity.

DEO GRATIAS!



“What more do you want...? Our Lady is our Mother, our good
Mother, our tender Mother.” (St. J.B. Cottolengo).

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GENERAL INTRODUCTION

My choice of the topic: “The Spiritual Motherhood of Mary. Its Application to the Cottolengo Contemplative Sisters in the Third Millennium,” was inspired by my grandmother’s genuine and innocent¹ question: “Are you really going to get lost wholly without leaving behind an image of yourself?” This question made me ask some rhetorical questions, which have lingered in my mind since 1992, twelve years down the line.

- ❖ Do women cease to be mothers the moment they renounce physical motherhood to embrace religious life?
- ❖ Do they really merit the title “bitter spinsters” who have run away from family responsibilities in order to enjoy life egoistically, as my grandmother and many others say?

This essay attempts to answer the above queries by trying to explore the Cottolengo contemplatives’ vocation to spiritual motherhood, in imitation of Mary the Mother of God and our Mother. I have purposely chosen Mary to accompany me as my guide and model in this research, simply because she lived and continues to live her vocation to both physical and spiritual motherhood in the truest and fullest sense of the term.

By fixing my eyes on her in prayer, I already have a glimpse that, had the religious women ceased to be mothers, had they renounced their vocation to motherhood, they would

¹ The genuinity and innocence of the question is to be understood in relation to the social-cultural milieu from which I hail.

not only be the most unfortunate category of people on earth, but they would also merit everybody's pity. The title "bitter spinsters" would really befit them. That of the religious women, however, is a motherhood that is realized at a different level, at the spiritual level. This however, does not mean that renunciation of the physical motherhood is not demanding. Actually, our current Pope John Paul II underlines lucidly that which it entails: "Renunciation of physical motherhood which can involve great sacrifice for a woman, makes possible a different kind of motherhood: motherhood according to the spirit."²

Through this study therefore, I want to deepen my knowledge of our sublime vocation (as Cottolengo contemplatives), to spiritual motherhood, in order to savor its sweetness and to grow in greater appreciation and love of it, because as the axiom goes: "The more we know, the more we love." It is my humble intention too in writing this paper, to be able to present to my people – in a balanced but convincing way – the truth that the renunciation of physical motherhood in order to consecrate one's life to God, does not impoverish or suffocate one's life in sterility. If truth be told, such renunciation for such a noble cause elevates one to a motherhood that is far superior,³ by virtue of one's spiritual union with God. The method that we will use in writing this essay is descriptive, analytical and synthetic.

This research paper is composed of four chapters. The first chapter looks into the divine motherhood of Mary, as the background against which we will study Mary's spiritual motherhood. Her spiritual motherhood springs, as it were, from her divine motherhood. In chapter two we will present a synthetic analysis of Mary's spiritual motherhood in the light of

² JOHN PAUL II, *Mulieris Dignitatem*, 79. cf. also Romans 8:4.

³ Superior in matters of extension as opposed to natural motherhood of one or even more children, who will always be few compared to those born in the order of grace.

John's gospel. We will make ample use of John's Calvary episode (Jn19:25-27) in which Mary features eminently as a spiritual mother.

Chapter three reflects on the spiritual motherhood of Mary as experienced in the "Little House of Divine Providence," taking as our point of departure the life history of St. Joseph Benedict Cottolengo – the founder of the above-named "opera," and his personal experience of Mary's spiritual motherhood. This will zero in on a brief consideration of the active response that is expected from God's and Mary's children – beneficiaries of Mary's maternal love, care, protection...name them. Finally, chapter four will be a concrete demonstration of how the Cottolengo contemplative sisters realize their vocation to spiritual motherhood, following in the footsteps of Mary, their model and teacher. This essay closes with a general conclusion in which the ideas from the four chapters are recapitulated.

The ideas and insights that make up this essay are taken from the rich mines of Sacred Scripture, Magisterium, sound and reliable literature on the topic, Cottolengo's spirituality and personal reflections. Lastly, I have decided to focus my attention on the Cottolengo contemplative sisters in the third millennium for the simple reason that we are "products" of our time: a time tarnished by individualism, materialism, secularism..., all attitudes that bespeak in very human terms, efficiency and productivity. Thus, whatever and whoever does not bring in profit is excluded. This exclusion may go to the extent of moral extermination or at most, even taking one's life. Thus, the figure of a mother⁴ makes a world of difference, in a world and culture of death as the one we are living in. This is because she sows seeds of life wherever she finds herself.

⁴ Here we are talking of someone who can be truly called a mother as opposed to the many women who call themselves mothers but perpetrate the culture of death, through their free choices to abort.

Chapter I

Mary's Divine Motherhood: Basis of her Spiritual Motherhood

1. Introduction

Albeit the topic of our interest is the spiritual motherhood of Mary, I feel that a concise consideration of her divine motherhood will give us a way forward. This, given the fact that Mary's spiritual motherhood is deeply and theologically rooted in her divine motherhood, as Juniper Carol has beautifully put it: "Mary's spiritual motherhood is the logical extension of her divine motherhood."⁵

In order to have a lucid grasp of the reality of Mary's sublime call to divine motherhood, this chapter will present arguments from the points of view of Reason and Scripture in support of the doctrine. A mention will also be made of the enviable hard work that the Church has done in her courageous efforts to defend, clarify and deepen the truth of the doctrine of Mary's Divine Motherhood.

2. Mary's Divine Motherhood

2.1 *Argument from Reason*

Arguing from the point of view of Reason, Hoelle asserts that motherhood involves three aspects.⁶ In the first place, when a woman generates, she generates the whole child, not just a part of it. For this reason, Hoelle maintains: "... a man speaks of his mother rather than

⁵ J.B., CAROL., *Fundamentals of Mariology*, 43.

⁶ P.C., HOELLE, "Mother of God", in *New Catholic Encyclopedia* (NCE), 21.

the mother of his body or his nature.”⁷ Secondly, the flesh of the parent is received by the child in generation. Thus, when a woman adopts a child, she does not really generate the child. Similarly, were God to create from nothing a child’s body and soul, and place it in a woman’s womb, the woman can not be called the child’s mother. The child is not from her own flesh.⁸

Thirdly, for a woman to be called a real mother and not a “surrogate” (my expression), the child that is born from her should take origin from her maternal ovum not from her heart or rib or any other part of her body. To corroborate this point, Hoelle argues thus: “Eve would not have issued from Adam by way of generation, were the account in Genesis to be read literally.”⁹ Thus, by shifting our attention to Mary the Mother of Jesus, we find that she truly generated Jesus; hence, she is his Mother in the real sense of the word. She gave him a human nature that makes him a man like other men. However, this does not mean that Jesus is a human person; he is a Divine Person.

Over the centuries, the Church has believed and taught the truth of the mystery about Jesus’ two natures: the divine nature, received eternally from the eternal Father: “Light from light, true God from true God, begotten not made, of one being with the Father...,”¹⁰ and the human nature, received in time, from his human mother.¹¹ Going by the above explanation, we are brought to the conclusion that Mary’s motherhood is far different from purely human motherhood. This is because “instead of giving human personality to be enshrined in Mary’s

⁷ P.C., HOELLE, “Mother of God”, in NCE, 21.

⁸ P.C., HOELLE, “Mother of God”, in NCE, 21.

⁹ P.C., HOELLE, “Mother of God”, in NCE, 21.

¹⁰ Cf. Nicene Creed A.D. 325.

¹¹ P.C., HOELLE, “Mother of God”, in NCE, 21.

womb..., [God] gives the divine person of his own Son...”¹² Consequently, Mary becomes the mother not of a human person but of a divine person. Reason therefore confirms the truth of Mary’s divine motherhood.

2.2 Argument from Scripture

St. Paul’s letter to the Galatians, written at around A.D. 57, is chronologically the first reference to Mary in the New Testament and it is a reference to her maternity. The quotation runs: “But when the fullness of time had come, God sent his Son, born of a woman, born under the law...” (Galatians 4:4).¹³

In the gospels too there are a number of passages with overtones of Mary’s divine maternity. The gospel according to st. Luke for instance, is rich with references to Mary as the mother of the Son of God. Specifically, in Luke 1:43, Elizabeth, under the motion of the Holy Spirit, acclaims Mary as the “Mother of my Lord.” The term “Lord”, if translated according to the Hellenistic parlance would mean “God.”¹⁴

In the same gospel, the Archangel Gabriel in his message to Mary during the Annunciation tells Mary that “she will conceive..., bear a Son..., who will be great, and will be called the Son of the Most High” (Lk 1:30-32). When Mary, shows herself disturbed by the strange message, the Angel assures her: “The Holy one who shall be born of you, will be called the Son of God” (Lk 1:35). The gospels according to John and Matthew also contain some passages, albeit scanty, with references to Mary as the “Mother of Jesus.” In the gospel

¹² P.C., HOELLE, “Mother of God”, in NCE, 21.

¹³ All Biblical quotations are from the African Bible.

¹⁴ Cf. G. KOCHOLICKAL, *Doctrinal Foundations of Christian Spirituality*, Class Lecture Notes.

according to John 2:1 and 19:25, Mary is called the Mother of Jesus. In Matthew 13:35, the same title is used in reference to her.

In the same way, a keen consideration of some Old Testament verses would reveal allusions to Mary as the Mother of God. A case in point is Isaiah 7:14, seen as a fulfillment citation, which has been taken, especially by the Fathers of the Church, to refer to Mary as the Mother of the Emmanuel – God with us. Besides, the symbolism of the Ark of the Covenant has also been taken to allude to Mary. Actually, it is seen as a depiction of the relationship between Mary and Jesus her divine Son.

Evidently, the Sacred Scripture confirms the truth of Mary's divine motherhood. In fact, the Catechism of the Catholic Church does not hesitate to assert this truth with vehemence, in support of the testimony of the Sacred Scripture:

Mary is acclaimed by Elizabeth... as “the mother of my Lord.” In fact, the one whom she conceived as man by the Holy Spirit, who truly became her Son according to the flesh, was none other than the Father's eternal Son, the second person of the Holy Trinity. Hence the Church confesses that Mary is truly “Mother of God” *Theotókos*.¹⁵ (Theissen's italics). Mary is therefore the mother of God, the *Theotókos*.

3. Mary as *Theotókos*

The term *Theotókos* in Greek means “God-bearer.”¹⁶ It is also understood to mean “God-bearing mother” or the “Bringer-forth-of-God.”¹⁷ History has it that the truth of Mary's divine motherhood was accepted by Christians long before the definition of the dogma. In fact, Christians began saying the venerable prayer that is addressed to Mary as *Theotókos*, long before the theological debates on Jesus and Mary were ever engaged in. The

¹⁵ Catechism of the Catholic Church, n. 495, 141.

¹⁶ A. MCBRIDE, *Images of Mary*, 65.

¹⁷ A. CUNNINGHAM, *The Significance of Mary*, 43.

prayer actually addresses Mary as mother of God and invokes her protection: “We fly to your patronage O Holy mother of God *Theotókos*. Despise not our petitions in our necessities, but deliver us from all danger O ever glorious and blessed virgin.”¹⁸

An Italian writer by name Salvatore Perrella, agrees with the findings of many other scholars that over the first eight centuries of Christianity, the Church was engaged in a number of struggles, as she tried to defend and clarify the fundamental truths of her faith. In fact, a long series of councils particular and/or regional, both in the Eastern as in the Western Churches were convoked to look into the diverse theological trends, not devoid of heretic views, regarding the Trinitarian, Christological, Pneumatological and Mariological truths of faith.¹⁹

The first four councils of the Church (Nicea A.D. 325; Constantinople A.D. 381; Ephesus A.D. 431; and Chalcedon A.D. 451) for instance, battled against the heresies of the time (fourth and fifth centuries) and shed light on the mysteries of the Trinity and Incarnation. Our intention here is to focus on the Council of Ephesus and not on all the four councils. However, it suffices to say that the endeavors of these councils in defending and elucidating the truths of the Catholic faith has been in a way a “theological benchmark for the Church ever since.”²⁰

4. The Council of Ephesus

This third council of the Church was held at Ephesus. It was occasioned by Nestorius’ direct denial of Mary’s divine motherhood. The council therefore was convoked under the

¹⁸ A. MCBRIDE, *Images of Mary*, 75-76.

See also M. O’CARROL, “Mary Mother of God,” in NCE, 865.

¹⁹ S. PERRELLA, *Maria, Vergine e Madre*, 185.

²⁰ A. MCBRIDE, *Images of Mary*, 65.

presidency of Cyril of Alexandria to clarify and defend the Christological truth about Jesus' hypostatic union, and consequently that of Mary's divine motherhood. Nestorius, was the patriarch of Constantinople but his spiritual heritage came from Antioch²¹ where he had studied.

According to Nestorius, Mary could only be the mother of the purely human Jesus, the *Christotokos* not the *Theotókos*. This being his teaching, he created a faith crisis in the Church imperiling the faith of the believers. It was Cyril of Alexandria²² who energetically opposed Nestorius. Actually, his second letter to Nestorius was approved by the council fathers who officially affirmed his teaching. A part of this letter reads:

Now the Word's being made flesh is nothing else than that he partook of the flesh and blood in like manner with us, and made our body his own, and proceeded man of a woman without having to cast away his divinity.... That is what the expression of the exact faith everywhere preaches: this is the mind we shall find in the holy fathers. In this sense they did not hesitate to call the holy virgin God's mother *Theotókos*²³

The great achievement of the Council of Ephesus cannot be over-emphasized. Its solemn declaration of Mary's divine motherhood is the climax of such success. The Council Fathers were more than convinced when they solemnly and vehemently spoke of Mary as being really and truly the mother of God and as such should be acknowledged and venerated by everyone.²⁴ The Council of Chalcedon, twenty years later in A.D. 451 re-confirmed the dogma that had been officially promulgated by the Council of Ephesus.²⁵ This is the literal text from the Council of Chalcedon: "The same was begotten from the Father before the ages as to the divinity, and in the latter days for us and for our salvation, was born as to his

²¹ A theological school that emphasized the distinction of the two natures of Jesus.

²² A theological school that emphasized the unity of the two natures of Jesus.

²³ M. O'CARROLL, "Mary Mother of God", in the NCE, 865-866.

²⁴ S. PERRELLA, *Maria, Vergine e Madre*, 188.

²⁵ S. PERRELLA, *Maria, Vergine e Madre*, 188; B. FORTE, *Maria Icona del Mistero*, 115.

humanity from the Virgin Mother of God.”²⁶ This is the truth that the Church continues to inculcate in her children through her teaching. Precisely that Mary is the mother of God *Theotókos*....

Thus, “through the mystery of Christ, on the horizon of the Church’s faith there shines in its fullness the mystery of his mother.”²⁷ Noteworthy, is also the fact that Mary as *Theotokos* is profoundly extolled by the Catholic Church, Orthodox Church and the ancient Churches of the East. All these “feel united by love and praise of the *Theotókos*.”²⁸

5. Conclusion

In this chapter, we have considered the dogma of Mary’s divine motherhood. We have stopped to consider at length the events of the council of Ephesus and have thrown a cursory glance on the council of Chalcedon. The title of *Theotókos* that was vindicated by Cyril at Ephesus was now destined to a fixed place in the Church’s Liturgy and hymnography. Furthermore, Mary acquired a permanent place in the consciousness of the faithful. Moreover, the faith intuition of the early Christians, precisely, that Mary is forever associated with the mysteries of Christ, gave them a renewed vision. They understood that if Mary is Christ’s mother, she could be their spiritual mother as well. In the following chapter, we will reflect on Mary’s spiritual motherhood in details.

²⁶ B. FORTE, *Maria Icona del Mistero*, 116.

See also G. KOCHOLICKAI., *Doctrinal Foundations of Spirituality*, Class Lecture Notes.

²⁷ JOHN PAUL II, *Redemptoris Mater*, 12.

²⁸ JOHN PAUL II, *Redemptoris Mater*, 66.

Chapter II

Mary's Spiritual Motherhood in the Light of John 19:25-27

1. Introduction

As we said earlier in the preceding chapter, Mary's spiritual motherhood (in the words of J. B. Carol) is the "logical extension of her divine motherhood." In this chapter we intend to study Mary's spiritual motherhood – a vocation that was conferred on her by God, by virtue of her being the mother of Jesus – for she who has given birth to Christ cannot fail to be the mother of believers,²⁹ if we really believe that Christ is our brother. Mary's divine motherhood cannot be viewed in static terms of physical motherhood. Being the mother of God, Mary continues to mother all those reborn by God's Spirit. For a clearer grasp of this doctrine, we will try to explore its historical development as well as its meaning, before embarking on a detailed study of John's Calvary scene (19:25-27), which is our focus.

2. Development of the Doctrine

Even though we find assertions and insights in the writings of the Church Fathers³⁰ of the first Christian centuries on the topic of Mary's spiritual maternity, they are scanty and occasional. It is actually during the Middle Ages that any real theological development of the doctrine begin to appear,³¹ (especially in the writings of Rupert of Deutz)³² otherwise, the

²⁹ CF. H., GRAEF, *Mary. A History of Doctrine and Devotion*, 169.

³⁰ These Fathers include Irenaeus, Epiphanius, Ambrose, Augustine....

³¹ A., BOSSARD, "Motherhood, Spiritual", in *Dictionary of Mary*, 336.

³² RUPERT of Deutz was a Benedictine monk born at Liège around 1075. He became the abbot of Deutz, across the Rhine. He stands out as the best medieval commentator of St. John (cf. IGNACE DE LA POTTERIE, *Mary in the Mystery of the Covenant*, Footnote, 246).

doctrine developed gradually. In fact, even the Calvary pericope of John (Jn 19:25-27), which today is increasingly seen as expressing the reality of the spiritual motherhood of Mary, gained its broader implications from the historical point of view only very gradually, as we shall see later. Historically, the Franciscan Pope Sixtus IV is held to be the first Pope to allude to Mary's spiritual motherhood, in his Apostolic Constitution *Cum Praecelsa* of February 27th 1447.³³

3. The Meaning of the Doctrine

A brief explanation of what the Papal Magisterium means by spiritual maternity, will be of great help in understanding the reality of Mary's vocation to spiritual motherhood of the humanity. A succinct explanation is given by W.J. Cole in his article on the spiritual maternity of Mary in which he gives the following three significations.

Firstly, he speaks of a *metaphorical* signification. In short, this means that "Mary acts in men's³⁴ regard as a mother acts towards her children. She prays for them, she obtains grace for them, etc."³⁵ Secondly, Mary's spiritual motherhood has an *adoptive* signification. Cole argues that "Christ willed that Mary adopt men as her children and that she possess the rights and fulfill all the duties of a mother toward men."³⁶ Thirdly, he speaks of a *real* signification of Mary's maternity of the humanity. He says that "Mary in some way transmits spiritual life to men by a kind of generation in the spiritual order and is, therefore, truly, the mother of men."³⁷

³³ W.J., COLE, "Spiritual Maternity of Mary", in NCE, IX, 352. See also J.B., CAROL, 49.

³⁴ In this case, the term "men" is used in an inclusive way.

³⁵ W.J., COLE, "Spiritual Maternity of Mary", in NCE, IX, 352.

³⁶ W.J., COLE, "Spiritual Maternity of Mary", in NCE, IX, 352.

³⁷ W.J., COLE, "Spiritual Maternity of Mary", in NCE, IX, 352.

Carol's clear and eloquent statement still sheds more light on the meaning of Mary's spiritual motherhood of the humanity. He vehemently states:

When we state that Mary is the mother of men we do not mean, of course, that she has given birth to them in the natural, physical order. Again, her maternity of mankind is not simply a figure of speech, or a mere legal fiction. When we style Mary our mother we mean that she really and truly communicated to us the life of grace, which makes us children of God.³⁸

A. Bossard concurs with Carol's way of thinking. Moreover, he brings us to the realization that it is not difficult to instinctively grasp the essential meaning of the title "Mary our mother", simply because it evokes memories of a universal experience that is ingrained in each man and woman: the experience of a mother-child relationship.³⁹

Even so, it is well to remember that Mary is our mother in an analogical way, and that applying to her all the realities of natural motherhood as far as we are concerned, would be senseless. Her motherhood of us is strictly "in the order of grace."⁴⁰ We will see this in fairly greater details here below as we undertake the study of the Calvary scenario.

4. Mary's Spiritual Motherhood at the Foot of the Cross (Jn 19:25-27)

²⁵Standing by the cross of Jesus were his mother and his mother's sister, Mary the wife of Clopas, and Mary of Magdala. ²⁶When Jesus saw his mother and the disciple there whom he loved, he said to his mother, "woman, behold your son." ²⁷Then he said to the disciple, "Behold your mother." And from that hour the disciple took her into his home.

The quotation above is one of the classical scriptural texts, besides the Proto-evangelium (Gen 3:15); the Annunciation pericope (Lk 1:26-38); and the pericope of the woman clothed with the sun (Apoc 12), which has been vastly used as a strictly biblical text in reference to Mary's spiritual motherhood.

³⁸ J.B., CAROL, *Fundamentals of Mariology*, 48.

³⁹ A., BOSSARD, "Motherhood, Spiritual", in *Dictionary of Mary*, 338.

⁴⁰ A., BOSSARD, "Motherhood, Spiritual", in *Dictionary of Mary*, 338.
See also LG 61. See also J.B., CAROL, *Fundamentals of Mariology*, 48.

4.1 Brief History of Interpretation

Before the advent of the exegetical evolution, the Church Fathers interpreted the Calvary scene (Jn 19:25-27) in an exclusively moral sense. In other words, they did not read it as a revelation of Mary's spiritual motherhood. It seems that they stopped at this moral sense of the text and did not push it any farther, though we should admit, they did consider Mary as a symbol and type of the Church.⁴¹ The event of Calvary was for the Fathers, just a sign of Jesus' filial piety towards his mother.⁴²

In fact, a hurried reading of John's text (19:25-27) would give and actually gives the impression of a kind of "systematization" of the mother by Jesus in the care of a trustful person [John].⁴³ Ignace de la Potterie, maintains the same idea as Luigi Guiducci when he says that: "Jesus was departing and the mother was without a spouse or sons who could shelter and care for her. She was left alone, and for the Jews, a woman left alone in life was a sign of chastisement. This is why Jesus before dying, delicately took care of his mother's future."⁴⁴ However, he dives deeper into the waters of John's rich symbolism and comes out with the profound meaning and a much broader application, which show that Jesus' gesture was more than a family arrangement. Indeed, he says: "Since the spiritual maternity of Mary is born here [at the foot of the cross], we need to analyze in detail the complex circumstances appointing her to a mission, which is not simply of domestic but Messianic importance."⁴⁵

⁴¹ Cf. The Writings of Sts. Ephrem and Ambrose.

⁴² Cf. L., GUIDUCCI, *Camminare con Lei*, 43.

See also I., DE LA POTTERIE, *Mary in the Mystery of the Covenant*, 246.

⁴³ Cf. L., GUIDUCCI, *Camminare con Lei*, 43.

⁴⁴ I., DE LA POTTERIE, *Mary in the Mystery of the Covenant*, 192.

⁴⁵ I., DE LA POTTERIE, *Mary in the Mystery of the Covenant*, 192.

Thanks to the help of exegesis and other improved methods of study, like Guiducci, today, most exegetes in both Catholic and Protestant circles, find in the Calvary scene indications of Mary's spiritual motherhood. It seems therefore impossible to maintain that "Christ's words refer to Mary's spiritual motherhood only by accommodation."⁴⁶

4.2 *Parallelism with the Cana Event*

A quick look at the Cana event in John 2:1-11, will help us have a clearer and a holistic understanding of the spiritual motherhood of Mary. At Cana, Mary's relationship with Jesus undergoes a total and profound transformation. Indeed, she makes a giant leap of faith: her privileged position as the physical mother of Jesus gives place to a spiritual motherhood of the faithful. Here at Cana, Mary is implicitly the mother of the faithful because she invites them to a docility of faith in her Son: "Do whatever he tells you" (Jn 2:5).

In other words, Mary's spiritual motherhood is not clearly stated. It is at the foot of the cross that Mary's motherhood of the humanity is explicitly stated and established. Besides, it is here at Calvary – where the mother of Christ "who stands at the center of the mystery... that embraces each individual and all humanity, is given as mother to every single individual and all mankind"⁴⁷ – that this motherhood reached its culmination and perfection.

4.3 *Ecclesial Significance*

John's Calvary pericope has an ecclesial significance in that the disciple who stands at the foot of the cross with the mother of Jesus, was not simply representing John but all the disciples of Jesus. The dying Jesus gave them [disciples] to Mary as her sons just as he gave

⁴⁶ J.B., CAROL, *Fundamentals of Mariology*, 51.

⁴⁷ M.L., TROUVÉ, *Mother of Christ, Mother of the Church*, 274.

See also J.B., CAROL, *Fundamentals of Mariology*, 53.

Mary to them as their mother. For what is impossible to God? Had he not said before his passion, at the last supper: "This is my body," making the piece of bread his body? In like manner, when he said: "Behold your mother", and "Behold your son," Jesus made Mary John's mother and John Mary's son.

John is to be understood as playing a representative role for all the disciples of all times and of all walks of life. By saying this, Jesus did not just proclaim Mary's spiritual maternity but he instituted it. Thus, this new motherhood of Mary does not issue from her. It is a gift that is not founded on merit but on grace. This is the reason as to why she is our mother in the order of grace.

Again, if Abraham can rightly be called "father" for what he had done (cf. Lk 16:24), and "father of all the believers" (Rm 4:16), how much more rightly and deservedly Mary! Furthermore, if Paul the apostle of the gentiles could dare say to his Christians in Galatia: "My children, for whom I am again in labour until Christ be formed in you!" (Gal 4:19), and again to his Christians in Corinth : "...I became your father in Christ Jesus through the gospel"(1Cor 4:15), how much more Mary, who, at the incarnation became our mother through her faith and obedience, and at the foot of the cross, brought us forth in pain and suffering!⁴⁸

5. Mary's Maternal Presence in the Life of Her Pilgrim Children

Not even eternity will be enough for us to thank Mary for what she has done and continues to do in our lives. In effect, the biggest role that she ever played in the life of the humanity is that of cooperating with her son in giving back to us the life of grace, which we

⁴⁸ R. CANTALAMESSA, *Mary Mirror of the Church*, 121-122.

had lost because of our sinful state. In connection with what we have just said, we also read in chapter eight (VIII) of *Lumen Gentium*:

The Blessed Virgin Mary was on this earth the Virgin mother of the Redeemer, and above all others and in a singular way the generous *associate*⁴⁹ of the Lord. She conceived, brought forth..., and she was united with him by compassion as he died on the cross. In this singular way she cooperated by her obedience, faith, hope and burning love in the work of the saviour in giving back supernatural life to souls.⁵⁰

Moreover, Mary's motherhood towards us is clearly perceptible in that she carries out the august mission of obtaining for us, through her motherly intercession, the life of grace that makes us children of God. This quality-life does not only enrich us, it also ennoble our purely human life. Furthermore, Mary dedicates herself so perfectly to her spiritual maternal mission in an incomparable way that not even the best mothers on earth can equal her. Besides, Mary has a personal relationship with each and every human person who recognizes her as mother. This is possible due to the universal dimension of Mary's maternal vocation.

Therefore, the realization of the active presence of Mary in our life, undoubtedly serves to heighten our sense of gratitude towards her, as well as to greatly appreciate the consoling truth that we have a mother who is for ever very close to us. By saying this, we are not in any way placing Mary on a pedestal as a small goddess. Rather, we in all truth, acknowledge her unequalled role of mother in our life and therefore extol she who God has dignified to honour by conferring on her the dignity of the mother of the humanity.

However, it is worth remembering that Mary's greatness is of a different kind from the one we envisage. It does not consist in making her authority felt by us, but in humbly and

⁴⁹ Vatican II, uses the term *associate* as a substitute for *co-redemptrix* which is theologically misleading.

Cf. also PAUL VI, *Marialis Cultus*, 28.

⁵⁰ *Lumen Gentium*, Dogmatic Constitution on the Church, Vatican II Documents, n. 61, 382.

always being in attendance upon others. More precisely, Mary is great in that, like the moon that gratefully points to the sun for its light, her purpose is none else than to point us to Jesus, the Rising Sun. Our devotion to her therefore, far from consisting in maudlin sentimentality or in vain credulity,⁵¹ is meant to make of us authentic disciples of Jesus, to whom Mary wants us to pledge our loyalty by her solicitous invitation: “Do whatever he tells you” (John 2:5).

6. Extent of Mary’s Spiritual Motherhood

It is no exaggeration to think that Mary’s spiritual motherhood is all-pervasive, considering its extent. In reality, she envelopes under her mantle all those who come under the kingship of her Son. These include all the rational creatures: angels and human beings, depending on the degree of the Christ-merited life of grace that they share. In this regard, Athanasius unhesitatingly asserts that, “even the angels owe their salvation to the blood of Christ.”⁵² The logical reasoning therefore is that since Mary was associated with her Son in the saving mission by virtue of her cooperation, she merits the title of “Mother of the angels.”

Carol interestingly explains the extent of the motherhood of Mary. He speaks of three categories of people who enjoy the privilege of being Mary’s spiritual children. As such, there are three kinds of motherhood attributed to Mary: *potential*, *actual* but imperfect and *perfect* motherhood. The following explanation is an application of Carol’s assertions. He says that *potentially*, Mary is the mother of all those who do not believe, since they are destined to union with Christ through their faith and charity.⁵³

⁵¹ LG, Dogmatic Constitution on the Church, Vatican II Documents, n. 67, 385.

See also PAUL VI, *Devotion to the Blessed Virgin Mary (Marialis Cultus)*.

⁵² A. BUONO, “Motherhood, Spiritual”, in *DM*, 440, quote from the writings of Athanasius.

⁵³ J. B., CAROL, *Fundamentals of Mariology*, 54.

Moreover, Mary is *actually* though *imperfectly*, the mother of all sinners, who are not yet cut-off but are still united with Christ.⁵⁴ Furthermore, she is *perfectly*, the mother of all the righteous who live the life of grace. However, Carol sadly admits of one exception. He says that Mary can in no way be called the mother of the damned, for they are definitely separated from God. They are cut-off from the life of grace.⁵⁵

7. Conclusion

We have explored, though in a very concise way, the doctrine of Mary's spiritual motherhood, from the historical, ecclesial as well as from the Biblical points of view. In line with Cole, many others including the author of this essay feel that we have reached a point in time, where it can be safely asserted that the doctrine of Mary's spiritual motherhood is certainly definable as a doctrine of faith. This is because it has been taught with greater emphasis and ever-increasing clarity by the ordinary as well as by the universal Magisterium⁵⁶ of the Church since Pope Sixtus IV's time.⁵⁷ Moreover, the theme of Mary's spiritual motherhood is amply present in Liturgical texts.

Having said this, let us continue to deepen our understanding of Mary's spiritual motherhood, particularly in the life of Joseph Benedict Cottolengo,⁵⁸ and in the life of the Little House of Divine Providence.

⁵⁴ J. B., CAROL, *Fundamentals of Mariology*, 54.

⁵⁵ J. B., CAROL, *Fundamentals of Mariology*, 54.

⁵⁶ Cf. The Marian Encyclicals of Leo XIII, Benedict XV, Pius XI, Pius XII, Pius X..., down to the very recent ones of Pope Paul VI and Pope John Paul II.

⁵⁷ W. J., COLE, "Spiritual Maternity of Mary", in NCE, IX, 352.

⁵⁸ Apart from this full name, the rest will appear in its abbreviated form: J.B. Cottolengo.

Chapter III

Mary's Spiritual Motherhood as Experienced in the LHDP

1. Introduction

In the preceding chapter, St. John the Evangelist led us in a masterly way in contemplating Mary's vocation to spiritual motherhood at the foot of the cross. In this chapter, we wish to explore the same vocation in a different context as we journey with J.B. Cottolengo. First of all, we will give a brief account of his life, his personal experience of Mary's spiritual motherhood, the dynamic maternal presence of Mary in the LHDP and finally, the response of God's and Mary's children to such solicitous presence.

2. A Brief History of the Life of J.B. Cottolengo

2.1 *His Birth and the Surrounding Circumstances*

J.B. Cottolengo was the firstborn son of Giuseppe Antonio and Benedetta Chiarotti. He was born on 3rd May 1786, three years before the explosion of the French Revolution in Paris.⁵⁹ Antonio's family was a staunch Catholic family but this fact was not reason enough to warrant life without the cross. Thus, if for a dozen times there was celebration of the birth of a child, for half a dozen times there was pain and tears, because six of the twelve children died at an early age. This is the unfathomable divine pedagogy and J.B. Cottolengo, schooled at the bosom of his family, had grown used to God's ways of acting.

⁵⁹ L. PIANO, *San Giuseppe Benedetto Cottolengo*, 17.
See also G. MARITATI, *The Ark of Charity*, 9.

In fact, he once said: “The ordinary style of Divine Providence is to embitter first the souls who later he will console.”⁶⁰

Hence, in the midst of joy alternating with sorrow, J.B. Cottolengo’s family sustained by faith, blessed God who gives and chooses to take back (cf. Job 1: 21b). J.B. Cottolengo, and two of his sisters, Teresia and Christine, and three of his brothers, Luigi, Ignazio and Agostino were the remnants of Antonio and Chiarotti’s children. Of these, three sons – J.B. Cottolengo, Luigi and Ignazio became priests. Agostino embraced marriage life so as to continue the family lineage, whereas the two daughters chose to remain single.⁶¹

2.2 *His Childhood*

Erik Erikson’s⁶² stages of development identify childhood with industry. He also says that a child learns through imitation and identification. All this is true about J.B. Cottolengo since he grew up as every other child. Actually, we may say that he was really the son of his parents, for he drank deeply from the abundance of their exemplary life of piety; a life solidly rooted in faith, hope and love. As the saying goes: “Like the father, like the son,” he developed a strong Marian and Eucharistic devotion, like his parents.⁶³

Not only that, but J.B. Cottolengo was also privileged to learn from his parents the art of true love for God and for the neighbour, with a particular preference for the poorest. One of the most striking but true facts about his childhood is that he developed a very sensitive attitude towards the poor when he was still a small boy. His, nevertheless, was not the kind of

⁶⁰ *Faith Unbounded*, (Sayings of St. Joseph Benedict Cottolengo), 46.

⁶¹ Cf. G. MARITATI, *The Ark of Charity*: 9-10.

⁶² Erik Erikson is one of the leading figures in the field of psychoanalysis and the first to study psychology in a positive way. He studied human development in stages from womb to tomb.

⁶³ Cf. G. MARITATI, *The Ark of Charity*: 10.

feeling of compassion that stopped at the sentimental level. It was concretized by his generosity and open-handedness; sharing whatever he had, even the little money that his parents gave him for his own use, with the poor. This kind of attitude did not leave his parents indifferent. Seeing their son's behaviour, they delighted in giving their alms to the poor through his hands in order to content him⁶⁴ and also to encourage him. We can therefore deduce the whence of his vocation both as a priest and as a founder, from such a staunch Christian background.

2.3 His Priestly Formation

Gianni Maritati, one of the most recent writers about J.B. Cottolengo, testifies to the fact that his family played an unequalled role in laying the foundation for his priestly formation. Most precisely, through their teaching and exemplary life, bearing in mind that "words move but example draws," they set conditions that were conducive for the growth of the vocational seed that was in him as a germ. It is no exaggeration to maintain that J.B. Cottolengo's conduct both at home and in school was irreproachable.

In fact, we read in one of the testimonies that: "he was modest, reserved and very serious in accomplishing his scholastic, religious and family obligations. He grew up respecting his parents and his educators."⁶⁵ Remarkable too was the contribution of the theologian Emanuele Amerano, pastor of St. Andrews Parish, in helping J.B. Cottolengo discover God's will. About such contribution, Maritati has this to say: "Under the attentive

⁶⁴ Cf. G. MARITATI, *The Ark of Charity*, 11.

⁶⁵ G. MARITATI, *The Ark of Charity*, 11.

care of the Pastor [Emanuele Amerano] Giuseppe learned to decipher the first signs of his vocation to the priesthood.”⁶⁶

It is therefore clear that both his philosophical and theological preparations had a good and strong Christian foundation. Indeed, just as grace builds on nature, J.B. Cottolengo’s religious and intellectual formations were a development and an enrichment of the formation that he had already received from his early childhood. Without going into many details of the different stages of his priestly formation, let us content ourselves with knowing that J.B. Cottolengo went through his priestly formation during a politically catastrophic period because of the 1789 French Revolution and its protracted effects. In fact, he did part of his studies privately – especially in 1806 – because Napoleon Bonaparte had ordered the closure not only of the religious congregations but also of the seminaries.⁶⁷

All in all, J.B. Cottolengo managed to dress in clerical habit and to begin his studies in philosophy at the age of sixteen. He went through the different steps of his priestly formation successfully and was eventually ordained priest on 8th June 1811 in Turin, approximately, at the age of twenty five years.⁶⁸ After his ordination, J.B. Cottolengo exercised his priestly ministry wonderfully, to the satisfaction and admiration of all and sundry. But as it turned out to be, God had other different plans for him.

Thus, at the age of forty-one he fell into a crisis, after which the grace of founding the LIIDP was granted on the 2nd of September 1827. The little that is known about this crisis is that it was a kind of passive purification. It was as though the Lord was testing his faith in

⁶⁶ G., MARITATI, *The Ark of Charity*, 10.

⁶⁷ Cf. V. DI MEO, *La Spiritualità di San Giuseppe Benedetto Cottolengo*, 22-23.

⁶⁸ Cf. G., MARITATI, *The Ark of Charity*, 11.

view of granting him greater consolation and grace. Actually, it was after this spiritual crisis that he received the charismatic grace that both inspired and empowered him to start the LHDP.

2.4 The First Signs of his Vocation as a Founder

Regardless of the fact that we can date precisely when J.B. Cottolengo received the inspiration to begin the LHDP, an incontrovertible fact is that God had called and chosen him to be the founder of the institute that even today stands as an emblem of God's paternal love and care to the brethren, especially the poorest, long before that historical moment.

As a matter of fact, the emergence of the signs of his vocation as a Founding Father has a fairly long history than we actually suspect. Point 2.2 above demonstrates this observation quite clearly. In fact, we have had occasion to point out, though in a passing way, J.B. Cottolengo's sensitive attitude towards the poorest category of his brethren. We have seen how he deprived himself, even as a small boy, in order to help those that were deprived, not of their own choice but because human greed had deprived them and continues to deprive them of the necessities of life.

If truth actually be told, he had a generous and spacious heart in which God and the humanity found plenty of room. But, what was the motivation behind such an attitude? Was it sheer philanthropy? Some people, if not all, might dismiss such questions as unintelligent and inopportune to be asked, taking J.B. Cottolengo's attitude towards the poorest, as any child's caprice or if not so, as a kind of identification (to assume the thinking of Erik Erikson) of the small boy with his parents who were so caring towards the poor, as we have noted above.

Be it as it may, the fact is that there was something more than any child's caprice and more than an attempt to identify with his parents, in J.B. Cottolengo's behaviour towards the

poorest. Actually, we will be surprised to note that there was a sound theological motivation behind his quasi-exaggerated concern for the poorest. In fact, when he was a small boy, he had begun to understand that the poor represented God. Thus, by helping them, he was convinced that he was “helping” God indirectly through them.

How he was able to understand this as a small boy is not known. Nevertheless, we can believe in God’s mysterious and unfathomable ways of granting infused knowledge to those that he chooses, regardless of such obstacles as age and the like. But, let us listen to him speaking for himself, lest we risk putting words in his mouth: “I want to become a saint by helping God.”⁶⁹ This is a resolution that he had written in his school exercise book; a resolution that attests to the fact that, though a small boy, J.B. Cottolengo perceived the poor as God’s representatives.

Thanks to his parents’ contribution in his early formation, which, together with God’s grace and his collaboration, made him worthy of Christ’s beatitude: “Come, you who are blessed by my Father.... For I was hungry and you gave me food, I was thirsty and you gave me drink, a stranger and you welcomed me, naked and you clothed me, ill and you cared for me, in prison and you visited me” (Mtt 25: 34ff).

2.5 The Birth of the LHDP

How did the LHDP then come about? We have already mentioned J.B. Cottolengo’s crisis (cf. end of point 2.3). A hurried reading of such a crisis would discard it, taking it to be a normal phenomenon. In fact, in Erik Erikson’s wording, it would be referred to as the mid-life crisis, given the fact that it struck him at the age of forty-one.

⁶⁹ G. MARITATI, *The Ark of Charity*, 11.

Without disregarding the above assumption, it is also worth viewing J.B. Cottolengo's crisis-phenomenon with the glasses of faith. This will bring us to the understanding that there was something more than a normal transitory stage. Faith will tell us that it was God knocking at his door, for he [God] had something in store for him; something that took its time to manifest itself, and that he did not grasp at once.

In fact, while he was still in the grips of the crisis, he was tempted to embrace a solitary life and live like a monk. He also thought of becoming one of Philip Neri's disciples, but his confessor Fr. Fontana dissuaded him and urged him to be patient, for God had a different mission for him. Thanks to J.B. Cottolengo's obedience and patience in waiting for God's times, he (God) did actually, though gradually, reveal his will.

Seen in this light, all the past experiences that J.B. Cottolengo went through were providential. They form that corpus of events that were meant to prepare him for that sublime and delicate mission: a mission which undeniably has won him so much renown in the Church and in the world, but which too was a "cross wrapped in honour," as Sr. Maria della Passione (current prioress of the Cottolengo Monastery – Tuuru) wisely puts it, when speaking about the apparent honor that accrues from being in a position of authority.⁷⁰

The protraction of the crisis made J.B. Cottolengo all the more despondent, practically robbing him of his usual joviality. However, the reading of the works of St. Vincent de Paul, at the suggestion of his superior and rector of the congregation of priests-theologians, Canon Francesco Valletti,⁷¹ partly uplifted his spirits. Nevertheless, what really gave his life a new momentum, an about-turn, making him turn a new page in his life, was the tragic incident of

⁷⁰ Information from Prioress' formal conference to the community, 10th June 2004.

⁷¹ Cf. G. MARITATI, *The Ark of Charity*, 19.

the miserable death of a certain Giovanna Maria Gonnet, a French woman from Lyon, the wife of Pietro Ferrario and a mother of five.⁷²

The family was traveling from Milan to France and made a stop at Turin when the health conditions of Gonnet deteriorated, jeopardizing her life. Because of her situation – she was six-months pregnant and suffering from tuberculosis – she was refused admission in the maternity and in the normal hospitals, due to the complex rules of the time and the fear of contagion. Thus, lacking medical assistance, her conditions grew worse, and so in their impotence, the widowed husband and the few people who were around sent for a priest to administer the last sacraments to the dying Gonnet.⁷³

It was not by chance that it happened to be the canon J.B. Cottolengo who was called to the assistance of that desolate family. This made of him an eyewitness to the sad event of the simultaneous death of the mother and the child, together with the sorrow and desolation of the husband and the orphaned children. He did his best to console them, but he too was deeply moved and wondered why God had allowed him to witness such an event.

As things turned out later on, the event of the death of Gonnet was providential. It was God-sent. In fact, immediately after J.B. Cottolengo had finished with Pietro's family, he went to the Church of *Corpus Domini* and while he was pouring out his soul to God, who alone is able to do what and to reach where humans cannot, a thought struck him. It was an inspiration. Immediately, he ordered the sacristan to ring the bell and when a few Christians gathered, they sung the Litanies of Mary. All the while he kept kneeling at the foot of the altar

⁷² Cf. G. MARITATI, *The Ark of Charity*, 26-27.

⁷³ Cf. G. MARITATI, *The Ark of Charity*, 26-27.

of Our Lady of graces (see appendix IA).⁷⁴ Nobody knows what went on in the mind and heart of J.B.Cottolengo at the moment. What is known is that after the Litanies he enthusiastically exclaimed: “Grace is accomplished! Grace is obtained! Blessed be the Holy Madonna.”⁷⁵ This took place on the 2nd of September 1827, a very important date because it marks the birth of the LHDP and of J.B. Cottolengo’s vocation as a Founding Father.

God’s times were now ripe and J.B. Cottolengo was ready to pull his sleeves and start the work: providing places where all the sick and poor people would be readily welcomed so that such an incident as that of Gonnet would never repeat itself, at least during his time and in his milieu. In this mission, he was spurred forward by the strength obtained him by the Blessed *Madonna* and the energizing power of the charismatic inspiration. Thus, the Blessed Virgin Mary occupies a very important place in the life of J.B. Cottolengo and of the LHDP.

3. J.B. Cottolengo’s Experience of Mary’s Spiritual Motherhood

One thing that is typical of the saints is their devotion to the Blessed Virgin Mary. J.B. Cottolengo is not exempted from the throng of the great devotees of Mary. Indeed, his devotion can be traced from his early childhood at the bosom of his family. In fact, the shrine of Our Lady of the Flowers, at Bra their town, was not a new place to him since his mother used to take him there when he was a child.

In reading more about J.B. Cottolengo’s devotion to Mary, the first impression that comes to mind is his filial love and affection for her. This is because many of his expressions

⁷⁴ G. MARITATI, *The Ark of Charity*, 27-28.

⁷⁵ G. MARITATI, *The Ark of Charity*, 28.

See also V. DI MEO, *La Spiritualità di San Giuseppe Benedetto Cottolengo*, 30.

address Mary as mother. The following are some of those expressions that J.B. Cottolengo used in addressing Mary with a passionate and filial love that was typically his.

- ❖ “Oh, Mary, I want to be your devout and dearest son, your favorite one...Oh, Mary, put me under your beautiful mantle, and if I am too much of a sinner and do not deserve so much, put me at least under your feet.”⁷⁶

By voicing his heart’s desire to become Mary’s devout and dearest son, J.B. Cottolengo exposes the kind of relationship that was there between Mary and himself. Needless to belabor the point, it was an intimate mother-son relationship.

- ❖ “For me, after God, I know whom I must love: it is my mother, it is your mother, it is the mother of all men....”⁷⁷

The above expression evidences J.B. Cottolengo’s experience of Mary’s spiritual motherhood of him and of all people. So, since love demands love, he was eager to reciprocate Mary’s love by loving her in return.

- ❖ “What more do you want...? Our Lady is our mother, our good mother, our tender mother.”⁷⁸

J.B. Cottolengo deeply experienced Mary’s maternal care and tenderness. By his words he brought others to the awareness of the goodness of Mary, leading them eventually, to love her tenderly. Furthermore, when J.B. Cottolengo was approaching the end of his earthly pilgrimage, he pledged his loyalty to Mary by confessing his childlike abandonment,

⁷⁶ L. PIANO, F.P., *Raccolti dai Detti di San Giuseppe Cottolengo*, n. 249, 367. Translated by Sr. Enricchetta Bellotti, a Cottolengo sister.

⁷⁷ L. PIANO, F.P., *Raccolti dai Detti di San Giuseppe Cottolengo*, n. 225, 341. Translated by Sr. Enricchetta Bellotti, a Cottolengo sister.

⁷⁸ L. PIANO, F.P., *Raccolti dai Detti di San Giuseppe Cottolengo*, n. 281, 403. Translated by Sr. Enricchetta Bellotti, a Cottolengo sister.

trust and love. She alone was his lean-on at the extreme moment of his life. Actually, he had lived loving her and having recourse to her maternal aid and so he wanted to die as he had lived. Indeed, on his death-bed, before breathing his last, he confidently spoke to Mary as though speaking to one's live mother:

❖ “Oh mother Mary, I am yours! Oh Blessed Lady, Here I am...! Holy Virgin, now it is up to you! Do your duty.! My Mother Mary! My Mother Mary!”⁷⁹

These among the many other sayings of J.B. Cottolengo, clearly show the very strong relationship that reigned between Mother and son. It was a deep-felt relationship in which the son sought to please the mother and the mother sought to content the son. In fact J.B. Cottolengo once remarked: “From our Lady, I obtain all that I ask for, she is so good she never refuses me anything.”⁸⁰ The consideration of J.B. Cottolengo's experience of Mary's spiritual motherhood ushers us to that of the experience of Mary's maternal role in the LHDP.

4. Mary's Maternal Role in the LHDP

An indisputable fact is that at the heart of the LHDP, the heart of a mother continues to beat. It is the heart of Mary, who exercises the maternal role of mediating/interceding, of consoling, of pointing to the essential. Let us examine each one of these roles in some depth in order to have a clear grasp of Mary's indispensable, maternal role in the LHDP.

⁷⁹ L. PIANO, F.P., *Raccolti dai Detti di San Giuseppe Cottolengo*, n. 344, 479. Translated by Sr. Enricchetta Bellotti, a Cottolengo sister.

⁸⁰ L. PIANO, F.P., *Raccolti dai Detti di San Giuseppe Cottolengo*, n. 302, 427. Translated by Sr. Enricchetta Bellotti, a Cottolengo sister.

4.1 Mediating (*Our Lady of Graces* – cf. *Appendix IA*)

The term Mediatrix in very simple terms means a go-between or a channel. In the LHDP Mary plays the role of mediating. Not having been accomplice in the crime of humanity, she qualifies to be the best, the only one to bring about a process of reconciliation between God and a fallen humanity. By saying this, we are not depriving Jesus – the only Mediator – of his role. Mary’s role is a sharing in that of Jesus; it is subordinate to it just as *Lumen Gentium*, the Dogmatic Constitution on the Church, clearly points out:

Just as the priesthood of Christ is shared in various ways both by his ministers and the faithful, and as the goodness of God is radiated in different ways among his creatures, so also the unique mediation of the Redeemer does not exclude but rather gives rise to a manifold cooperation which is but a sharing in this one source.⁸¹

Pope John Paul II commenting on Mary’s maternal role in his encyclical: “The Mother of the Redeemer,” beautifully states that, her maternal role flows “from the superabundance of the merits of Christ; it is founded on his mediation, absolutely depends on it, and draws all its efficacy from it.”⁸²

J.B. Cottolengo, in anticipation of Vatican II, understood pretty well Mary’s maternal role of mediation. In fact, we know from his sayings that “it is through Mary that we receive all graces.”⁸³ Thus, Our Lady of Graces is venerated as the one through whom God showers graces in abundance. Not only is she venerated as a channel of graces, but also as the foundress of the LHDP because it is through her intercession that the charismatic inspiration

⁸¹ L.G., Dogmatic Constitution on the Church, Vatican II Documents, n. 62, 383.

⁸² JOHN PAUL II, *The Mother of the Redeemer (RM)*, 47.

See also LG, Dogmatic Constitution on the Church, Vatican II Documents, n. 60, 382.

⁸³ L. PIANO, F.P., *Raccolti dai Detti di San Giuseppe Cottolengo*, 225. Translated by Sr. Enricchetta Bellotti, a Cottolengo sister. See also, L. PIANO, *Faith Unbounded*, n. 34.

came to J.B. Cottolengo. Moreover, since J.B. Cottolengo did not exhaust or lessen the power of Mary's intercession the moment she obtained for him the grace of founding the LHDP, she continues to obtain both spiritual and material benefits for the LHDP and for individuals who trustingly invoke her maternal assistance.

In many of the prayers that are specific to the Cottolengo families, Mary's maternal intercession is readily sought. Some of those prayers include: the little chaplet (coroncino) "Virgin Mary mother of Jesus, make us saints,"⁸⁴ which is recited daily by the sons and daughters of J.B. Cottolengo wherever they are. The invocation of Mary in the prayer of the "I Adore You..." which reads: "Holy Virgin, my dearest mother, keep me under your protection, help me to walk in the presence of God..."⁸⁵ is another prayer in which Mary's maternal care and protection are both experienced and sought. Just to mention but a few.

Besides, the continuous miracle that is referred to as "Divine Providence," by which the LHDP lives, concretely witnesses to the fact that Our Lady of Graces is alive and active in interceding for the spiritual and material needs of the Little House and of individuals as well. Such august maternal mission of Mary is experienced by J.B. Cottolengo's followers perennially because before his death, he assured them that, in heaven he would cling to the mantle of Our Lady, that he would watch over them and obtain for them the graces they would always stand most in need of.⁸⁶ Such is the mediatory/intercessory role of Mary the mother of God and our mother in the order of grace. (cf. Appendix IB for an African view of this point).

⁸⁴ L. PIANO, F.P., *Raccolti dai Detti di San Giuseppe Cottolengo*, n. 195. Translated by Sr. Enricchetta Bellotti, a Cottolengo sister. See also Constitutions Article, 36.

⁸⁵ Cf. Prayer recited by the "Cottolengos" at dawn (card).

⁸⁶ Cf. V. DI MEO, *La Spiritualità di San Giuseppe Benedetto Cottolengo*, 271.

4.2 Consoling (Our Lady, the Consolata – cf. Appendix II)

We already know that J.B. Cottolengo’s “charitable opera” was founded to cater for the spiritual and the physical needs of the poorest. Therefore, it is understandable why he chose to place Our Lady the Consolata at every entrance to the Little House. Most probably, he wanted these disadvantaged and challenged brethren to experience a mother’s consolation and reassuring love in entering and leaving the LHDP.

It is characteristic of a mother to console. Mary is invoked as the “Comforter/Consoler” of the afflicted in the prayer of the Litanies. The Little House, which we can rightly call the house of suffering, is not without a consoler. Mary’s maternal presence amongst the suffering brethren is strongly felt and it continues to be not only important but necessary. Mary is a Consoler because she herself is consoled. She suffered and so she can understand those who suffer and since she is herself consoled, she can console. Actually, only he/she who is consoled can console. This is what St. Paul tells us in his second Letter to the Corinthians: “Blessed be God... the Father of compassion and God of all encouragement, who encourages us in our every affliction, so that we may be able to encourage those who are in any affliction with the encouragement with which we ourselves are encouraged by God” (2Cor 1:3-5).

Our Lady of Consolation stands by all who suffer, not in order to remove the sufferings but to console, to encourage and to obtain for them enough strength so that they can bear their sufferings serenely. Such is the experience of all the members of the LHDP, hosts and guests alike.

4.3 Pointing to the Essential (Our Lady of the Rosary – Cf. Appendix III)

It is the role of a mother to teach and instruct or rather to impart important lessons to her children. In doing so, a mother acts as a pointer to the essential things that give meaning

and value to the life of her children, not only by word of mouth but by example as well. Going by this assertion, we find that in the LHDP Mary is taken as a mother and a teacher of prayer. In fact, she is venerated under the title of Our Lady of the Rosary and her image shows her holding a Rosary in her right hand and with her left hand, she clasps Jesus tenderly. (cf. Appendix III).

Mary acts as a constant reminder to all the followers of J.B. Cottolengo and to all the guests, that God merits the pride of time and space in our life. Mary points to our union with God through prayer, which is that essential element that actually gives meaning and value to life. This makes it [prayer] a *conditio sine qua non*, a life-commitment for anyone claiming belongingness to the Cottolengo family. Indeed, the LHDP is founded and supported solely by it.⁸⁷ It is the first and most important thing therein,⁸⁸ one of the driving wheels, which makes the Little House move.⁸⁹ In a nutshell, we can say that Mary is the spiritual mother, the “good mother, the tender mother” of the LHDP. As such, she is experienced by all who enter and leave this haven – the LHDP – which is a prolongation and an enlargement of the bountiful hand and heart of our heavenly Father.

Having said this, we now shift our attention to the response that is expected of the beneficiaries of Mary’s maternal love and care. By response, there is no intention here to suppose that Mary succors God’s children in order to receive something in return for her

⁸⁷L. PIANO, F.P., *Raccolti dai Detti di San Giuseppe Cottolengo*, 265. Translated by Sr. Enricchetta Bellotti, a Cottolengo sister. See also Directory of the Cottolengo Contemplative Sisters, article, 63.

⁸⁸ L. PIANO, F.P., *Raccolti dai Detti di San Giuseppe Cottolengo*, 24. Translated by Sr. Enricchetta Bellotti, a Cottolengo sister.

⁸⁹ L. PIANO, F.P., *Raccolti dai Detti di San Giuseppe Cottolengo*, 99. Translated by Sr. Enricchetta Bellotti, a Cottolengo sister.

maternal love, care, protection,...name them. Far be the thought! We will soon see the motivation behind Mary's active presence in the life of God's people.

5. Response Expected from the Beneficiaries of Mary's Maternal Concern

As we have just said above, Mary's maternal concern and her active role in the life of all God's children, regardless of colour, race or religious affiliation are not meant for any selfish gain on her part. Everything is gratuitously done for their own benefit. However, she, like Jesus asks for our collaboration, because she does not want to coerce us in any way, in accepting the gift of salvation. She wants us to be free and responsible children who are ready and willing to play their part howsoever small. This too is Mary's will. Let us now pick two key responses, *inter alia*, which seem to spell out clearly what Mary desires from her beneficiaries.

5.1 Imitation

J.B. Cottolengo's challenging exhortation to his followers: "What use is it to call Mary, Mother, if we do not show we are her children by imitating her virtues?"⁹⁰ urges them to confess their sonship to Mary by the imitation of her virtues. In like manner, the Council Fathers of Vatican II did not hesitate to make it clear to the faithful that Mary is not in need of their sterile and transitory affection. The Fathers put it strongly and succinctly: "Let the faithful remember moreover that true devotion ... proceeds from true faith, by which we are led to recognize the excellence of the mother of God, and we are moved to a filial love towards our mother and to the imitation of her virtues."⁹¹

⁹⁰ L. PIANO, *Faith Unbounded*, 34. II., F. p., n. 249, 367.

⁹¹ LG, Dogmatic Constitution on the Church, Vatican II Documents, n. 67, 385-386.

We respond to Mary's maternal love by imitating her virtues of union with Jesus, love for him, docility to the Holy Spirit, faith, charity, humility... *Ad Infinitum*, not in order to reproduce a photocopy of her life. This is actually impossible. Rather, what is asked of us is "to center on her fundamental attitude of self-giving to the Lord and commitment to his service as well as the service of our fellow humans."⁹² This is one of the Blessed Virgin Mary's greatest desires.

No one can claim inability to imitate her or the incapacity to learn from this valiant woman how to face life and its challenges. In fact, her life, such as is described in the gospels, contains lessons for everyone. By looking at Mary's life, therefore, "we learn to live in prosperity and adversity, prayer and work, honors and humiliations," convinced that "in imitating [her] Mary, we imitate Jesus, King and incomparable Model of all virtues."⁹³

5.2 Conversion

In almost all the apparitions of Mary, conversion of life is one of the key requests that she makes to her devotees. Conversion has to do with the change of life. It entails a choice or a decision to be and to do good as opposed to being and doing evil. The contemporary world is tormented by evils of all kinds. Evil however, as the Holy Father Pope John Paul II vehemently states, "is not some impersonal, deterministic force at work in the world. It is the result of human freedom... which is ever present at the heart of the drama of evil.... Evil always has a name, and a face: the name and face of those men and women who freely choose it."⁹⁴

⁹² A. BOULET, "Mary, Spiritual Motherhood", in *DM*, 188.

⁹³ A. BUONO, "Mary, Spiritual Motherhood", in *DM*, 440.

⁹⁴ JOHN PAUL II, *L'Osservatore Romano*, 22/29 December, 2004, n. 51/52, 6-7.

Today, Christ's Vicar and ambassador, like Christ's Mother two thousand years ago, calls upon everybody to take the message of conversion seriously, by leading lives worthy of human persons, leave alone Christians. This is possible if we make ours the challenge that the Pontiff – in the words of the great apostle Paul – launched at the close of the year 2004: "Do not be overcome by evil but overcome evil with good."⁹⁵ To live thus, entails a constant dying to the wounded human nature that craves for revenge. It is a question of conversion, which when lived faithfully, becomes a confession of our identity and procures us a valid ticket for membership in the Kingdom of Heaven.

Mary asks for nothing more or less than such responses of imitation and conversion, among others, from those who claim to be her children. We can believe and say with utter conviction that this is what Mary expects from all God's children, because the sources are credible. The Magisterium of the Church and the Founder of the Cottolengo communities (like all other founders) speak under the inspiration of the only unerring Guide and Teacher: the Holy Spirit.

6. Conclusion

In this chapter, we have explored J.B. Cottolengo's life and his vocation as priest and founder, his personal experience of Mary's spiritual motherhood and the maternal role of Mary in the LHDP. This exploration has eventually brought us to a consideration of what responses Mary would expect of us as her spiritual children.

⁹⁵ JOHN PAUL II, *L'Osservatore Romano*, 22/29 December, 2004, n. 51/52, 6-7.
Cf. Romans 12:21.

We wish now to make a move to Chapter IV in which we will apply the fruits of the previous chapters. By doing this, we hope to come up with concrete ways of imitating Mary as Cottolengo Contemplative Sisters, in realizing our vocation to spiritual motherhood, for we, like Mary, are called not to sterility but to give life – to bring forth a progeny to God the Father in the order of grace.

Chapter IV

The Cottolengo Contemplative Sisters: Spiritual Mothers, like Mary in the Order of Grace

1. Introduction

Our current Chapter will explain how the Cottolengo contemplatives concretely realize their vocation to spiritual motherhood by imitating Mary the Mother of God and of humanity. Even so, we will first of all give a general overview of the Cottolengo communities, so that we may know the place of the Cottolengo contemplative communities in the LHDP. In addition, we will have a look at the origin and the scope of these communities. Such knowledge will help pave the way for us in our efforts to examine the factors that qualify the Cottolengo sisters as spiritual mothers of Jesus and of the humanity.

Furthermore, we will reflect on the indispensable role of the Holy Spirit in spiritual mothering, and then dedicate some time and space in examining briefly the possible obstacles that might come in the way of the Cottolengo contemplatives, as they strive to live their vocation to the full as authentic spiritual mothers. Last but not least, we will try to answer the question: "Has contemplative life anything to offer to the Church and world of the third Millennium?" The general conclusion will follow suit.

2. A Panoramic View of the Cottolengo Communities

The Cottolengo contemplative communities do not stand aloof as separate entities all by themselves. Rather, they are part and parcel of the big Cottolengo family, generally called: The Little House of Divine Providence (LHDP). This big family is composed of priests, brothers, sisters of contemplative life and sisters of active life, who are blended together by

the one charism and by the family spirit that makes of them brothers and sisters, sons and daughters of the same heavenly Father and of the same founder.

In fact, the Holy Father, Pope John Paul II, on the occasion of the 175th anniversary of the death of Joseph Benedict Cottolengo, emphasized its preciousness and exhorted the Cottolengo sons and daughters to safeguard it tenaciously and to promote it. Thus, as one big family, the Cottolengo followers joyously strive to witness the paternal love of God the Father to the disadvantaged brethren, whom we honorably refer to as “our masters,” following the tradition of our founder.

2.1 The Cottolengo Contemplative Communities

The Cottolengo sisters “are a congregation of pontifical right composed of two families: sisters of contemplative life and sisters of apostolic life.”⁹⁶ This being the case, the Cottolengo contemplative communities are an essential part of the big Cottolengo family. A cursory look at their foundation and mission will reveal that J.B. Cottolengo founded five communities of contemplative life, four for religious women and one for men. This was shortly before his early death at the age of fifty-six (56) years.

Father Lino Piano, a Cottolengo priest and historian, argues that J.B. Cottolengo’s zeal in founding the monasteries, one after the other, was not because of the increase of vocations to this kind of life. Partly, it was because he wanted to respond to the specific and concrete needs of the Little House, of the Church and of the world.⁹⁷ In addition, it was in order “to appease the desire of his heart that was continually longing for being united with God,”⁹⁸

⁹⁶ Constitutions of the Sisters of St. J. B. Cottolengo, n. 1, 17.

⁹⁷ G. MARITATI, *The Ark of Charity*, 19.

⁹⁸ G. MARITATI, *The Ark of Charity*, 19.

since he was naturally inclined to contemplation. Here below, are the five monasteries of contemplative life and the mission for which they were founded.

2.1.1 The Hermitage” of the Holy Rosary

The hermitage of the Holy Rosary was the first and only male monastery that J.B. Cottolengo founded. This was in the year 1840. It was situated at Gassino and the pioneer monk was called Br. Philip Buronzo, who was followed by others with the passage of years.

The scope of this monastery was not explicitly indicated. However, one of the close collaborators of J.B. Cottolengo, Costamagna, affirms that in founding the above mentioned monastery, he [Cottolengo] wanted to establish the *Laus Perennis*, that is, continuous day and night adoration. The monks had a special obligation to intercede for the king and for the state.¹⁰⁰ Unfortunately, this monastery did not last for more than ten years after its foundation. Actually, Fr. Anglesio, J.B. Cottolengo’s first successor suppressed it because the members diminished considerably. Moreover, it became increasingly difficult to keep the chant going because of the lack of physical strength. Therefore, its closure took place in 1850, a decade after its foundation.¹⁰¹

2.1.2 The Suffrage

This monastery was founded within the framework of the LHDP on the tenth (10th) February 1840. It bore the name, “The Convent of the Suffrage.”¹⁰² The nuns had the duty of praying everyday and for ever, for the suffrage of the souls of the many patients who were

⁹⁹ This term is not used in its strict and literal sense.

¹⁰⁰ Cf. L. PIANO, *San Giuseppe Benedetto Cottolengo*, 579.

¹⁰¹ Cf. L. PIANO, *San Giuseppe Benedetto Cottolengo*, 583.

¹⁰² Cf. G. MARITATI, *The Ark of Charity*, 90.

dying and being buried in St. Peter in Chains, as the nearby cemetery was called.¹⁰³ With their prayers, the nuns were to “shorten the wait of these dead, for their eternal beatific vision, their true and complete health.”¹⁰⁴ Besides praying for the dead, the nuns took turns in adoring Jesus in the Most Holy Sacrament of the Eucharist, day and night.¹⁰⁵

2.1.3 The Retreat of Piety/Monastery of Divine Mercy

With a difference of just a year after founding the Convent of the Suffrage, J.B. Cottolengo founded the Retreat of Piety in 1841. The nuns were called the “Daughters of Piety”,¹⁰⁶ and they were thirty-three in number in honour of the thirty three years that Jesus spent on earth.¹⁰⁷

The specific mission that was assigned to the Daughters of Piety was to “honour the Passion of Jesus and to venerate the sorrows of the Blessed Virgin Mary, his Mother”.¹⁰⁸ This monastery served a very important role in the LHDP. It was a “vocational garden,” where young ladies received basic formation courses for a period of time, after which they were allowed to make an informed choice of what road to take: whether to join the Apostolic or the Contemplative life.¹⁰⁹

¹⁰³ Cf. G. MARITATI, *The Ark of Charity*, 90.

¹⁰⁴ Cf. G. MARITATI, *The Ark of Charity*, 90.

¹⁰⁵ Cf. G. MARITATI, *The Ark of Charity*, 90.

¹⁰⁶ Cf. G. MARITATI, *The Ark of Charity*, 89.

¹⁰⁷ Cf. G. MARITATI, *The Ark of Charity*, 90.

¹⁰⁸ Cf. G. MARITATI, *The Ark of Charity*, 90.

Cf. L. PIANO, *San Giuseppe Benedetto Cottolengo*, 586.

¹⁰⁹ Cf. G. MARITATI, *The Ark of Charity*, 90

J.B. Cottolengo's great wisdom surfaces here. By having the young ladies make a common experience in a common place, he underscores the oneness of the Cottolengo Sisters of both families (apostolic and contemplative) regardless of their different styles of life.

2.1.4 The Carmelites/Carmel Monastery

This is the fourth monastery that was founded by J.B. Cottolengo. It was founded in the same year as that of the Retreat of Piety, that is, in 1841. It was and is still situated at Cavoretto on the hills of Turin.¹¹⁰ The scope of this monastery was modified by J.B. Cottolengo's immediate successor, Fr. Anglesio. He states that the prayers of the Sisters and their acts of mortification, should be offered for the triumph of the Church, for the sanctification of the Clergy, for the Church's hierarchy and for the religious orders.¹¹¹ It is named after our Lady of Mt. Carmel.

2.1.5 The Monastery of St. Taide/St. Joseph Monastery

The year 1841 saw the birth of another monastery that bore the name: St. Taide. The precise date of its foundation was 1st June 1841. This was a convent for the prostitutes who had got converted from immoral life. Fr. Anglesio says that these ladies should aim at the perfection of the work of grace and that they should direct their prayer to God for the conversion of their companions who were still in the world, so that the Lord can give them the necessary light to realize the danger into which they had put themselves.¹¹² This monastery was a concrete epiphany of the magnanimity of the heart of J.B.Cottolengo. Actually, it

¹¹⁰ Cf. G. MARITATI, *The Ark of Charity*, 91.

Cf. L. PIANO, *San Giuseppe Benedetto Cottolengo*, 596.

¹¹¹ Cf. L. PIANO, *San Giuseppe Benedetto Cottolengo*, 596.

¹¹² Cf. L. PIANO, *San Giuseppe Benedetto Cottolengo*, 603.

betrays his compassion for and the trust that he put in the possibility of change in other people. His, was indeed, a Christ-like attitude towards the poor and the sinners.

After the death of J.B. Cottolengo, his successors: Fr. Anglesio and Fr. Bosso founded two other monasteries of contemplative life. These are: the monastery of the Most Precious Blood and that of the Sacred Heart. In 1991, two of the six monasteries (the Suffrage and the Retreat of Piety) were fused together to form the present day *janua caeli* monastery. Diminution of members, old age and lack of vocations were the reasons for this decision. On 8th December 1981, a new Monastery was inaugurated in Kenya-Meru. Thus, all in all, there are six Cottolengo monasteries of contemplative life.

Evidently, J.B. Cottolengo was a very dynamic man. He did not tarry when an inspiration struck him. Rather, he acted with immediacy, sometimes without second thoughts. While such a manner of acting is likely to be judged as imprudent and simplistic, nevertheless, knowing the man J.B. Cottolengo closely would reveal that his acting was governed by faith that was founded on God. In fact, his confessor could not laud him [Cottolengo] better than when he said that he had more faith than the whole city of Turin.

We can therefore conclude that his manner of acting, as we shall continue to ascertain, was governed by his strong belief and trust, that the inspirations that came his way were from God, and so he had but to act promptly. We will now say something about the indispensable role of the Holy Spirit, the principal agent in spiritual mothering.

3. The Role of the Holy Spirit in Spiritual Mothering

It would be almost senseless to speak about spiritual motherhood without any mention of the significant role that the Holy Spirit plays in it. The Holy Spirit is the primary agent of spiritual fruitfulness. In fact, if we skim through the pages of Sacred Scriptures, from the Old

to the New Testament, we will find out that the Holy Spirit has a very important role to play in causing life where there is death. For instance, at the dawn of creation, the Spirit hovered over the waters causing life to sprout from chaos (cf. Gen 1:1-2). Similarly, God breathed life into the lifeless creature that he had made in his image and likeness and it became a living being (cf. Gen2:7).

Besides, in order to underline the enlivening action of the Spirit, the psalmist does not hesitate to say: "By the breath of his mouth the heavenly hosts were made" (Ps 33:6). Moreover, Job says that "if he were to take back his Spirit to himself, withdraw to himself his breath, all flesh would perish together and man would return to his dust" (Job 34:14). A beautiful and powerful image of the life-giving action of the Holy Spirit is presented in the book of Prophet Ezekiel. It is the image of the dry bones, on which the Spirit of God is invoked, hence giving life to the immense dead army of the house of Israel (cf. Ez 37:1).

In the New Testament, the action of the Holy Spirit becomes much more explicit and conspicuous. Here, there are ample attestations of the efficacious action of the Holy Spirit. He is truly the "Lord, the Giver of life."¹¹³ Incontrovertibly, the episode that stands out, over and above all others as a witness to the powerful action of the Holy Spirit in history, is the event of the incarnation of Jesus. Both Matthew and Luke underscore the fact that Jesus was conceived by the power of the Holy Spirit (cf. Matt 1:18 and Lk 1:34). This took place two thousand years ago, but the Holy Spirit continues in time to fecundate the virginal womb of

¹¹³ Cf. The Catechism of the Catholic Church (CCC), n. 689, 138.

Christ's bride, the Church, so that, like Mary, she can also give birth to numerous children for God.¹¹⁴

Similarly, he continues to fecundate individual persons in whom he finds docility of heart, so that, these in turn, become mothers of Christ and of God's sons and daughters in the order of grace. This ushers us into a brief reflection on the two dimensions of spiritual motherhood: bringing forth Christ and bringing forth the humanity.

4. The Two Dimensions of Spiritual Motherhood

4.1 Bringing Forth Christ

How can sinful humans really become mothers of Christ? The language itself sounds blasphemous; an attempt to prove to God that it was unnecessary to single out one woman, Mary, to preserve her from every stain of sin, in order to make her the mother of the second Person of the Most Holy Trinity. Any sane person, anyone who has beheld even in a cloudy way, a little of God's holiness, will actually hesitate to attribute to herself the title of "mother of Christ."

However, be that as it may, humans have the courage to say that they are mothers of Christ, because Jesus himself elevated us to that unbelievable height; to that dignity of his very mother when he said: "My mother and my brothers are those who hear the word of God and act on it" (Lk 8:21). We will now reflect on how the Cottolengo contemplatives bring forth Christ through listening and acting on the word of God, and through the other ways that we will gradually see.

¹¹⁴ Cf. CCC, n. 722, 200.

4.1.1 Through Listening to and Acting on the Word of God

By and large, the contemplatives practically live on and by the word of God. This can as well be a hypothesis. Nevertheless, personal experience of more than a decade in one of the Cottolengo monasteries stands as a witness to the above assertion. The word of God permeates, as it were, all of their life. No wonder it is said that some of the desert Fathers knew the Bible by heart.

The Cottolengo contemplatives dedicate a considerable amount of time to reading, pondering and studying the Word of God. By listening to it, they conceive Christ and by incarnating it, that is, putting it into practice, they bring him forth. Hugo Rahner, sheds more light on what we have just said when he says that “whenever you receive Christ’s word within you, and you let it live in your heart, and you build it up with your thoughts as in the womb, then you can be called Christ’s mother.”¹¹⁵ Thus, the Cottolengo contemplatives bring forth Christ in this sense.

4.1.2 Through their Deep Eucharistic Life

A striking phenomenon that I have observed in some couples that really love each other, is that they somehow resemble even physically. They are so intimately united by their mutual love that they are no longer two but one flesh (cf. Mtt 19:5). On the spiritual sphere, things are no different. Union with Jesus produces even greater effects, for he transforms the person so united with him into himself.

¹¹⁵ H. RAHNER, *Our Lady and the Church*, 73. This author has quoted one of the Cappadocian Fathers from the 4th century, of the circle of Gregory Nazanzius, on Matthew 12:50.

Evidently, the union that we are talking about here is not that of pious sentiments, but one that is founded on true and sincere faith and love. Such union is arrived at in many ways: through prayer, especially the prayer of adoration, constantly thinking about Jesus,...and through the reception of Jesus in the Most Holy Sacrament of the Eucharist. The latter is the most intimate kind of union that a person can ever experience at the spiritual level.

Thus, by their continued desire for union with Christ through their loving submission to his holy will, and above all, through their deep Eucharistic life, the Cottolengo contemplative sisters progressively become, as it were, mothers of Christ. In other words, those who see, hear or meet them are able to see, hear and meet Christ in and through them, within the possible limits within which a human person can radiate God in his manifold richness.

This, it seems, is the message that His Holiness Pope John Paul II seeks to drive home in his Apostolic Exhortation *Vita Consecrata*, when he reminds religious men and women worldwide, that they are “christs” to their brothers and sisters.¹¹⁶ It is possible to be “christs” to others because when we receive Christ with the right dispositions, we not only become one with him, but we also become other “christs,” since we are not the ones who transform him into ourselves but vice versa.

4.1.3 Through the Charity of a Good Word

The inhabitants of Tuuru Parish where the Cottolengo monastery is situated, refer to the nuns as the “Sisters who talk with God.” In their great simplicity, they believe that if they go to the nuns when they are burdened, they will receive a good word. Others are even more

¹¹⁶ Cf. JOHN PAUL II, *Vita Consecrata*, 26.

daring because they believe that the nuns will give them solutions to all their problems. So, they turn to them whenever they are faced with life's burdens and challenges, hoping to hear an efficacious word from the nuns. They go to them to ask for a word of advice, for a word of encouragement, for a word of hope, for a listening ear, and so on and so forth.

In fact, the sisters who have offered their humble service in the parlor are living witnesses to the continuous miracles wrought by God in the hearts and lives of many brethren, through the good word of the nuns. Of course, it is not the word *per se* that transforms or consoles. The fact is that through their good word they instill peace, love, serenity, joy..., in their hearts. We strongly believe that in hearts where such virtues are present, Jesus is therein. He is born in their hearts and so he is the one who consoles and transforms every situation, by turning sorrow into joy, darkness into light, weakness into strength... death into life. However, even if he does not change the situations to any better because he alone knows what is good for each one of us, he gives the necessary strength to them so that they can bear their trials with serenity.

In this way, the Cottolengo contemplative sisters bring forth Christ in the hearts and lives of their brethren, not by preaching, not by working in their midst, but through a good word that has been graced by the presence of Jesus. Rahner, agrees with the above statement, when he says: "... he [she] is above all the mother of Christ, who [speaks] preaches the truth; for he [she] gives birth to our Lord, who brings him into the hearts of hearers; he [she] is the

mother of Christ who through his [her] words inspires a love of our Lord in the spirit of his [her] neighbour.”¹¹⁷

4.2 *Bringing Forth the Humanity*

4.2.1 *Through the Charity of their Prayer*

All will agree with the fact that prayer in its true sense is a powerful tool by means of which we can reach out and embrace everyone. To put it more correctly, it is a tool through which, Jesus at our request, can reach all and sundry. The simple deduction from this argument is that prayer has a universal bearing to it. It is all-embracing (cf. Appendix IV). If every true Christian prayer is all-inclusive, then the Cottolengo contemplatives not only embrace everybody in their prayer, but also carry everybody's needs to God in prayer with the love of a mother. Every body is their son and daughter.

Like Moses, who, with his hands raised to heaven prayed for the victory of the Israelites against their enemies (cf. Exodus 17:1-16), so the Cottolengo contemplative sisters keep vigil in their prayer, for the victory of God's Kingdom in the hearts and lives of all the men and women on the face of the earth. Furthermore, at the foot of the Tabernacle, they present the manifold needs of their brethren to Jesus, the source of everything that is good.

Moreover, at the foot of the cross, the Cottolengo contemplative sisters take their place with Mary, their model and teacher, sharing the lot of Christ's hour and offering as she did, the cup of pure faith to the Father. In addition, in the company of Mary the Consoler of the afflicted, the Cottolengo contemplative sisters keep their watch – in the spiritual sense – besides the beds of their brethren who are therein crucified by sickness, loneliness and

¹¹⁷ H. RAINER, *Our Lady and the Church*, 77-78. He has quoted the writings of Gregory the Great. Brackets mine.

rejection, offering in union with them or even on their behalf, the bitter cup of their sufferings.

They do this firmly believing that a disinterested (not self-centered) prayer, that is made according to the intentions of Christ, has divine power in it and can obtain “un-hoped for results.”¹¹⁸ Without exaggeration, the good Lord has granted them to witness the marvels of God’s action in their own lives as well as in other people’s lives when they truly pray. In reality, they have seen people born and re-born in faith, in hope, in charity, in true humanity. It is in this way that the Cottolengo contemplative sisters bring forth the humanity through the charity of their prayer.

4.2.2 Through the Witness of their Humble, Silent and Hidden Life

Our contemporary world is full of noise. It is full of words, given the incomparable space and role accorded to Mass Media. However, much as the noise increases, words seem to gradually lose their meaning. People want to see more than to hear. As a result, they go out looking for witnesses rather than teachers and in case they look for teachers, such have to be witnesses too.

Did not Jesus say two thousand years ago: “Your light must shine before others, that they may see your good deeds and glorify your heavenly Father?”(Mt 5:16). Therefore, in keeping with Christ’s words, the Cottolengo contemplative sisters strive to witness to the primacy of God, in the way they live their life. They do not go out to preach; their life preaches instead. At this point, we will be quick to realize that for a style of life to bear effective witness, it has to be genuine, authentic and above all true/honest.

¹¹⁸ F. PASQUERO, *I will Follow You*, 114.

The Cottolengo contemplative sisters, in obedience to the exhortation of Mother Giovanna, the General superior who inaugurated the Cottolengo Monastery of Tuuru in 1981, have been trying along the two decades that have elapsed since then, to give witness to the brethren through a genuine, authentic and honest life, within the possible limits, as a result of the inevitable human frailty.

Consequently, their every action – even the smallest – becomes a little yeast to ferment faith, hope love, justice,... in the hearts and lives of the brethren. Furthermore, all those who come in contact with them do not leave the threshold of the cloister being the same as they came. Something happens in their life. They find it difficult to explain such an experience in words because it enters in the realm of grace, and so can only be explained by experience. In this way, the Cottolengo contemplatives bring forth the humanity through the witness of their life.

4.2.3 Through their Willing Participation in the Salvific Mission of Jesus

In the constitutions of the Cottolengo sisters, we read the following exhortation: “Let us feel personally responsible for the sin of the world, never forgetting that we are called to cooperate in the salvation of it through Christ our Saviour.”¹¹⁹ Following the example of Jesus who offered himself for the salvation of the humanity, the Cottolengo contemplative sisters offer their life and their whole being for their own salvation and for that of the humanity. In union with Christ, they offer their penances and their daily crosses as a sacrifice

¹¹⁹ Constitutions of the Cottolengo Sisters, Art. 44, 79.

of expiation for their own sins and for those of the humanity, in this way completing what is still lacking in the passion of Christ.¹²⁰

Moreover, since their style of life entails constant death to self, they embrace such small daily deaths with the certainty that their deaths are not for the sake of death but of abundant life, because “unless a grain of wheat...dies, it remains just a grain of wheat; but if it dies, it produces much fruit”(Jn 12:24). Actually, the measure of the act of a Cottolengo sister’s self-giving is “up to the sacrifice of life.”¹²¹ Like Christ, they accept death so that their brethren can have life in abundance.

Undoubtedly, there are many more ways of bringing forth Christ and the humanity, which have not been considered in this paper due to space limits. However, suffice it to say that the entire life of the Cottolengo contemplative sisters, with all its vicissitudes, is a continuous effort, a continuous “holy game”¹²² – as the current Mother Prioress of the Cottolengo Monastery, Tuuru simply puts it – of untiringly bringing forth Christ and the humanity. They bring forth Christ by constantly tending towards perfect configuration with him as much as possible. They bring forth the humanity by obtaining from Jesus the “transformation of the water of unbelief into the good wine of unwavering faith in God.”¹²³ Having said this, we now proceed to reflect on the possible obstacles that the Cottolengo contemplative sisters meet as they strive to realize their vocation to spiritual motherhood.

¹²⁰ Cf. Constitutions of the Cottolengo Sisters, Art. 44, 79.

See also St. Paul’s Letter to the Colossians, 1:24.

¹²¹ Constitutions of the Cottolengo Sisters, Art. 73, 127 & 129: Formula of Religious Profession.

¹²² Interviewed by author, 20th December 2004.

¹²³ G. POLLANO, *Eucaristia da Amare e Far Amare*, 64.

5. Obstacles to Spiritual Motherhood (Fruitfulness)

It is possible to live in the world of illusions, by thinking that the cloister can make spiritual mothers, just because it provides the necessary conditions that are conducive to the full realization of the vocation to spiritual motherhood. As a matter of fact, unless one is willing and ready to employ her full capacity in collaborating with God's Spirit, unless one is ready to take full advantage of these favorable conditions, she will conceive and writhe in birth pangs, only to give birth to wind.¹²⁴

Contemplatives have rightly lamented, over the years, that the world does not understand them, and worse still, that the world does not appreciate their style of life.¹²⁵ In reality, from the world, the contemplatives receive anything but criticism, misunderstanding, contempt, marginalization.... As if these contemptuous references were not enough, the contemplatives are referred to as "useless parasites."

Without denying the pain that such challenges do cause, nevertheless, we wish to call attention to the fact that many of the problems of the contemplatives are not from without but from within.¹²⁶ Actually, an honest gaze at the insiders of the enclosures will reveal the sad but true fact, that many of the things they do or avoid constitute the possible traps that are, in the final analysis, obstacles in their day-to-day efforts in living their vocation to spiritual motherhood of Christ and of the humanity. Some of those possible obstacles include the following.

¹²⁴ Cf. Isaiah 26:18. The prophetic oracles of Isaiah to the unfaithful Israelites.

¹²⁵ The author asks to be excused for this generalization.

¹²⁶ "Many and the greatest of our problems are normally not outside us but inside. Drivers for instance, complain of the many accidents on the roads, attributing their causes to bad roads and the like. However, an honest examination of the whole issue of accidents will reveal the fact that many of the causes of accidents are from within the driver. Careless driving, drunkenness when driving, a boy friend trying to kiss his girl friend while driving.... All these causes are not from outside but from within." Fr Ambrose Mutinda, Spiritan, Lecture at Tangaza College, 12th February, 2005

5.1 *Spiritual Pride*

Even the most spiritual act, like prayer, can be used for some selfish ends, hence becoming a stumbling block, if the virtue of humility does not constantly become a thermometer to regulate one's motivations for acting. Bearing in mind the fact that contemplative Sisters are human beings like everybody else, it is not difficult to understand the fact that they can also be tempted into spiritual pride. Such pride is made manifest in two ways. First of all, the person who is praying may portray a sullied mood when no results accrue from the hours or years of prayer. This may eventually lead to discouragement since the person cannot see the fruits of her apostolate of prayer.

Secondly, the person who is praying might be inflated with pride when the Lord rewards her spiritual labors, by granting her to see the fruits of her prayer, if in humility and gratitude such a one does not attribute such results to God's *hesed*,¹²⁷ then the person ends up falling prey to the above kind of pride. Careful attention has to be paid because such pride is so subtle that it can even go unnoticed.

One might wonder how spiritual pride is an obstacle to spiritual fruitfulness. The fact is that when we fall prey to such pride, God is no longer at the center of our prayer. Our expectations and we, are at the center. In such a situation therefore, the Spirit of God who enlivens our every good action, is expelled, so that our prayer – which is aimed at bringing God, the source of all life to people, and to take people to him so that they can have life – brings death, for where there is no God, no life can thrive.

¹²⁷ A cumulative term encapsulating all the attributes of God, like, goodness, mercy, faithfulness ...

In order to overcome such pride, one needs to fix her gaze on God and to persevere in her commitment to prayer, certain that God sees and knows what is good for us, he knows when to grant what and to who. Our God is a loving Father who sees that which is done in secret, in humility and in pure faith, and who rewards those who so act by making them experience inner joy and peace when they pray, even when their petitions are not granted as they desire.

5.2 *Discrepancy between Theory and Praxis*

It is not very difficult to notice in our secular as well as in our religious worlds, the yawning gap that separates the spoken word/the promises made and the action/fulfillment of those promises. One of the obstacles to spiritual fruitfulness, which even Jesus condemned in his time, is that of listening to the word and failing to act on it. This is similar to conceiving a child and suffocating it so that it is not given birth to.

In the same way, the Cottolengo contemplative sisters may run the risk of having the Word of God daily in their hands, listening to it and even making nice and pious resolutions. There is nothing bad with this. Problems crop in when such resolutions are left either half-fulfilled or even systematically forgotten.¹²⁸ Such a state of affairs obviously and sadly leads to what Raniero Cantalamessa calls “spiritual abortion.”¹²⁹

Such spiritual abortions can be curtailed or even avoided altogether, by making a firm resolution not to postpone putting the Word of God or a spiritual inspiration into practice.

¹²⁸ Cf. R. CANTALAMESSA, *Mary: Mirror of the Church*, 71.

¹²⁹ R., CANTALAMESSA, *Mary: Mirror of the Church*, 71.

These postponements are the ones that lead to the uncountable spiritual abortions that mark, not only the life of the contemplatives but of every praying person – if only we are honest enough to admit it.

5.3 Routine Performance

Anyone who has ever taken prayer seriously knows out of experience, the great temptation that one can easily fall into. Precisely, that of boiling down prayer to a routine performance, so that one prays for the sake of quieting the conscience, not in order to communicate with the loved and loving Other [God]. Cottolengo contemplatives, like the rest of the contemplatives have the honour of being people of much prayer, if we may be allowed to use quantitative language. This is an indisputable truth. True also is the fact that they do fall into the above trap. Prayer risks becoming a routine performance, even in places like the monasteries where it is given the pride of space and time.

By routine performance here we mean, getting too much used to the practice of prayer so that it simply becomes a “compliance with habit, dull and mechanical, a petty performance into which [people] are trained till tameness, shortness, superficiality, are its chief elements.”¹³⁰ If not any of the above, then, prayer may become “little else than the half-passive play of sentiment which flows languidly on through the minutes or hours of easy reverie.”¹³¹ Needless to belabor the point, spiritual fruitfulness cannot be possible in a situation like this, where there is no sincere and genuine communication with God who is the source of life.

¹³⁰ E.M., BOUNDS, *The Power through Prayer*, 53. A quote from the words of CANON LIDDON.

¹³¹ E.M., BOUNDS, *The Power through Prayer*, 53. A quote from the words of CANON LIDDON.

However, this temptation can be overcome through a personal examen on one's relationship with God and seeking spiritual direction from a good spiritual director. Otherwise, if the situation is not corrected, prayer cannot be effective nor can it bear fruits of grace and holiness. Evidently, lack of fruits presupposes sterility, barrenness and death as opposed to fruitfulness, which is a sign of life.

5.4 Insecurity

Generally, when people are criticized, despised or rejected, they feel insecure. Criticism, contempt, indifference...may be signs of ingratitude, especially when they come from people whom one is serving. At times, the contemplatives find themselves in the grips of criticism and contempt. They are looked down upon and defamed because of their style of life which is termed "old-fashioned." Other times, insidious voices are heard, of those who tease them by telling them to leave their cloisters in order to go out to serve the increasing needy brethren.

Those who hold such ideas argue that inside the cloister the contemplatives do only three things: they pray, eat and sleep. So, they waste away, suffocate their lives in sterility, waste time and egoistically enjoy living comfortable lives. Such unpleasant and provocative remarks are bound to lead one into insecurity, discouragement, discontent and self-pity, all enemies of spiritual fruitfulness. However, if the contemplatives' aim in whatever they do is to glorify God and to collaborate with him for the salvation of the brethren and not to win people's applauses and esteem, then they are sure of remaining untouched since the hope of their reward is anchored in God.

This obstacle is surmountable if the Cottolengo contemplatives remember that even Jesus, their Teacher and Master went through the same experience. In reality, the world did

not know and did not even bother to understand that he was offering his life for its salvation. This fact should spur them forward so that gratuitousness becomes the mark of their self-offering and of every act that they do in favour of their brethren. Moreover, the fact that they are criticized and despised for doing the right thing, makes their love all the more pure, rendering every one of their act meritorious, because there is no selfish intention attached to it.

Admittedly, there are other obstacles that have not been mentioned. The aforementioned few are indications of the battle that even the Cottolengo contemplatives are called to wage against the old man in them so that the new man can emerge. It is in living a life of an intimate union with this new man, Jesus Christ, that their life acquires meaning. But, before we draw such a conclusion, it is well to ascertain whether our Church and world of the third Millenium has anything to benefit from the Cottolengo contemplatives and from the contemplatives in general.

6. Is Contemplative Life still worth Living in the Third Millenium?

One may wonder why the above question. The reason is simple. The Cottolengo contemplative sisters are products of the time and age of the third Millenium; a time of great and rapid changes, a time in which individualism, secularism, materialism... have found a home in the hearts and minds of people.

Therefore, in the secrecy of their cloisters, the contemplatives are reached by the echo of the grand changes that are sweeping across the globe. Big names like “globalization” reach their ears, and like everybody else, they are challenged to read the signs of the times and to make the necessary adjustments in order to cope with the present times.

This is because they cannot pretend to be so impermeable as not to be affected by what is going on in the modern world; the world of the third millennium.

Moreover, if yesterday the question about whether or not contemplative life is worth living was only a whisper, today, as technology seeks to solve the many problems that there are and to give answers to the many questions that humans keep asking, as the sense of the sacred gradually disappears and God's space in the hearts of many gets smaller and smaller, the question is all the more loud, almost palpable: Is contemplative life worth living when we can solve many of the problems that needed their prayers and can answer many of the questions that needed their wisdom?

By skimming through the Post-Conciliar Document, *Perfectae Caritatis*,¹³² we have a glimpse of the esteem that the Catholic Church has for those whom God has chosen to lead a contemplative style of life. Similarly, a second Post-Conciliar Document, *Venite Seorsum*, affirms the central place that contemplatives occupy in the Church:

Your are specialized, and your specialty is...edifying for the whole Church, in fact, for the whole society....[You] constitute the heart, nourish the spiritual richness, sublimate the prayer, sustain the charity, share the sufferings, the fatigues, the apostolate, the hopes, increase the merits [of the Church of God].... The Church sees you as the highest expression of itself: You are in a sense, at the apex.¹³³

Alfred McBride also gives an answer to the above question, not from the standpoint of an intellectual who has studied nice theories in defense of contemplative life but from a firsthand experience.

¹³² Cf. *Perfectae Caritatis*, n. 7.

¹³³ *Venite Seorsum*, 27-30. Brackets mine.

This is what he says:

I have been a beneficiary of their [the Carmelite nuns] prayers and concern..., for the forty-four years of my priesthood. I have felt their impact and known their effectiveness. I have seen firsthand their influence on the local city. From their posts at prayer they radiated faith, hope and love and service to thousands of others, even though they remain within their virginal cloister. Their walls are really windows into the infinite which turns their eyes outward to the world and its need for prayer, love and salvation.¹³⁴

7. Conclusion

In this chapter, we have looked at the Cottolengo Contemplative communities in general and in particular at the Cottolengo contemplative sisters, their foundation and aim, their vocation to spiritual motherhood, which is possible only because of the life-giving action of the Holy Spirit.

We have also examined some of the concrete ways in which the Cottolengo contemplatives realize their vocation and the possible obstacles that come or may come their way, as they endeavour to live this vocation in its fullness. Finally, we have tried to answer the question whether the contemplative style of life is worth living or not in the third millennium.

We have seen that the vocation to spiritual motherhood is not an easy one. It calls for constant death to self so that Jesus and the humanity can have life in and through the contemplatives. However, the fact that this vocation is demanding, is no reason for discouragement, but a call to collaborate with God's Holy Spirit so that he can make them more and more fruitful, always for the greater glory of God and for the eternal good of the brethren (for their salvation).

¹³⁴ A., MCBRIDE, *Images of Mary*, 96-97.

GENERAL CONCLUSION

Our essay has been an adventure into the feminine vocation to spiritual motherhood. By use of the Sacred Scriptures, the Magisterium of the Church, renowned authors and personal reflections, we have been able to discover with gratitude, the sublimity of such a vocation. It is sublime because it is of divine origin: God the Father willed it when he chose Mary to be the human mother of his Divine Son, Jesus.

The four chapters that constitute our essay are geared towards a unique end: to help us appreciate, with thankful hearts and minds, God's immense and unconditional love for us humans, by giving us a mother and to help us discover whether we can imitate her in any way, as Cottolengo Contemplative Sisters. In fact, Chapter one is a reflection on the divine motherhood of Mary as the basis of her spiritual motherhood. We have acknowledged the great efforts of the Church in clarifying and defending the doctrine of Mary's divine motherhood of Jesus.

In Chapter two, we have contemplated Mary's call to spiritual motherhood, as her crucified Son elevated her to this new dignity as the mother of multitudes in the order of grace. In Chapter three, we have journeyed with St. J.B. Cottolengo in our reflection on Mary's spiritual motherhood as experienced in the LIIDP. Beginning from his time and age, across the years to our present time, we have come to the conclusion that Mary enjoys the

honour of a mother in the LHDP, and as such she is applauded and venerated. Finally, our last chapter, has brought us into contact with the Cottolengo contemplative sisters. We have tried to understand how they realize their vocation to spiritual motherhood, because they, like Mary, have been called not to sterility but to spiritual fruitfulness.

Moreover, we have realized that those who are called to the contemplative life are not “little angels” but humans like all others, struggling to live their vocation to the full, amidst the daily temptations, that not only come from without but also from within the enclosure. Lastly but not least importantly, we have expressed our wonder, whether contemplative life can offer anything to the Church and world of the third millennium.

Reading through the two Post-Conciliar Documents, *Perfectae Caritatis* and *Venite Seorsum*, we have realized that the contemplatives have something to offer the Church and world of the third Millennium. Besides, the personal confession of Alfred McBride affirms the above truth. Thus, both affirmations (and probably many others which have not been written down or shouted aloud, but which testify to the contemplatives’ maternal commitment), extol contemplative life and confirm the contemplatives’ vocation to spiritual motherhood.

From our essay, we can therefore draw two logical conclusions, among others. Firstly, the contemplative life is important to the Church and world of the third millennium. Secondly, the women who embrace religious life are by no means “bitter spinsters.” The fact that they renounce physical motherhood does not impoverish them in any way. On the contrary, it elevates them and commits them even more. Therefore, they are mothers in the true and full sense of the term, under the one condition that they live their vocation truly and genuinely.

Although we have focused our attention solely on the contemplatives, we truly acknowledge the fact that the Cottolengo apostolic sisters are in no way less spiritual mothers. In fact, through their full-time, selfless dedication to the Lord in the person of our disadvantaged brethren, they too bring forth Christ and a progeny for God in the order of grace.

Therefore, the two families of Cottolengo sisters, together with all the religious women worldwide can delight in the fact that, while our parliaments are so too full of debates around the question on birth control, they can bring forth millions of spiritual sons and daughters, without the fear of overpopulating paradise. In fact, the more they are, the greater the joy in heaven (cf. Lk 15:7-10).

ABBREVIATIONS

Apoc.	Apocalypse
CCC	Catechism of the Catholic Church
cf.	Confer; Compare
DM	Dictionary of Mary.
ed.	Edited by
etc	et cetera
ff	and the following
F.P.	Fiori e Profumi (Flowers and Perfumes)
Fr.	Father/Priest
Gen.	Genesis
J.B.Cottolengo	Joseph Benedict Cottolengo
Jn	John (Evangelist)
L.G.	Lumen Gentium
LHDP	Little House of Divine Providence
Lk	Luke (Evangelist)
Mtt	Matthew (Evangelist)
NCE	New Catholic Encyclopedia
N. p.	No place
n. d.	No date
Os.	Hosea (Italian abbreviation)
Rm	Romans
RM	Redemptoris Mater
Sr.	Sister
St.	Saint
Sis.	Saints

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APPENDIX 1A: OUR LADY OF GRACES.



Our Lady of graces is the Foundress of the LHDP. Actually, it is through her intercession that J.B. Cottolengo obtained the initial charismatic inspiration to start the LHDP. In the above picture, J.B. Cottolengo can be seen in the posture of one who is imploring. This reminds us of the episode of the death of the French woman and mother, Giovanna Maria Gonnet, that occasioned the founding of the LHDP.

APPENDIX IB: The Mediatory Role of the African Mother¹³⁵

It would be great injustice to leave out the important role that the African woman and mother plays in the life of her sons and daughters: the intercessory/mediatory role. In fact, in exploring Mary's mediatory role in the LIDDP, it was most consoling to discover that she is so close to the African woman and mother.

Normally, African children – especially grown-up children – do not go to their fathers directly in case they need something, rather, they go through the mother, who acts as a go-between the father and the children. This however, does not mean that they are afraid of the father. Reasons can be many and varied. One of the surest reason is that the mother is very close to the children and she understands their needs.

Moreover, her innate gifts of sensitivity and selfless concern for the good of others, put her at a good position to obtain whatever she is requesting. Indeed, it is a delightful thing to see the confidence with which the children entrust their needs to their mothers, of course, yesterday more than today, due to the rapid changes that our time and age has known: changes that have disrupted the healthy network of relationships even between family members. Those who still keep the practice strongly believe and trust that once their needs are entrusted to the mother, they will certainly be met, and in fact, they are.

Thus, for all African sons and daughters who have the daring courage to confess the truth, having made the unrepeatable experience of a mother's love and warmth, will most certainly find it easy to go to God through Mary as compared to those who have been deprived of such an experience.

¹³⁵ M. KARIMI, interviewed by author, 23rd January 2005.

APPENDIX II: OUR LADY, THE CONSOLATA



OUR LADY CONSOLATA PRAY FOR US

Our Lady, the Consolata is the good and tender mother who consoles. She is the mother of consolation. Her Son Jesus Christ is the Consolation par excellence that she gives to the humanity. Our Lady, the Consolata is very dear to all the sons and daughters of the LHDP.

APPENDIX III: OUR LADY OF THE ROSARY

Our Lady of the Rosary is the Great Patroness and Protector of the LHDP. She is also the dear mother who teaches us the importance of union with God through prayer. On the 7th October of every year, she is specially honored and celebrated in the LHDP.

APPENDIX IV: A Prayer expressing the Universal Character of a Cloistered Nun's Spiritual Motherhood

Nel silenzio, il giorno nasce i vetri istoriati
Stendendo ampie lame di colore nel 'coro' monastico.

L'una accanto all'altra, nel silenzio della meditazione,

Le monache sono sogame brune di solitudine.
Dio che vuoto di cose umane,
Che povertá immensa é mai questo silenzio
Che scava nel cuore l'attesa e la sete di te, bene infinito
In cui perdersi come un raggio nella sua sorgente...

Tu mi hai dato un cuore di donna, Signore,

un cuore caldo e trepido,

fatto per amare ed essere amato:

un cuore che suggerisce il tepore di una casa

e il ridere gioioso di bimbi

e sguardi bruni e profondi
che si posano teneramente sui figli.

E hai separato per te questo mio cuore,

Come un terreno vergine per la tua parola.

L'hai cinto di una solitudine gelosa del tuo amore,

Dio dagli occhi immensi come l'infinito.
"Oracolo del signore: la attireró a me,

la condurró nel deserto e parleró al suo cuore...

Ti faró mia sposa per sempre,
e tu conoscerai il signore" (Os. 2:14-20).

(Source: From an anonymous author. Given to me by Sr. Tarsilla Karimi, a Cottolengo sister).

E mentre tu "parli al mio cuore"
nel silenzio umile e orante di questo
giorno che nasce,
Il mondo intero é in me
come un bimbo
che si desta e che chiama
E si volge a te, o signore,
col nome di "Padre".

É una folla infinita
di gente che in me
ti tende le braccia,
Un'umanitá che si ridesta
nel primo mattino:
Voci inquietanti d'angoscia
e di pena,
Voci gioiose di bimbi
che vanno alla scuola,
Voci rabbiose di operai
che hanno perso il lavoro,
Voci di gente sfruttata che piange:
tutto é in questo
povero cuore "separato,"
tutto é assunto e presentato a te
in un'offerta
che ha le dimensioni del mondo.

Signore Dio che mi ami
e che mi hai innamorato,
La mia giornata, anche oggi,
sará solitaria.oscura,
Nascosta agli occhi di tutti,
gonfia forse di fatica e di pena.
Ma il mio cuore é caldo e trepido,
É un cuore di donna
fatto per amare ed essere amato.
E nel silenzio in cui lo possiedi,
tu lo rendi una culla
Dove ogni uomorinascce al tuo amore.