

VIVA MEMORIA
34

The Redemptoristine
“Theological Journal”

March, 2013

VIVA MEMORIA, # 34



The Redemptoristine "Theological Journal"

EDITORIAL

In presenting "Viva Memoria, #34," your Sister Editors and also the same current members of your "Service Board," have changed the pattern and format of publication according to the directives and majority vote of the May, 2012 General Assembly in Mater Domini.

"That the 'Viva Memoria' become a 'Theological Journal' focusing on the writings of Mother Celeste and St. Alphonsus. It is to be published at least once a year and be distributed by E-mail. On request a printed copy will be made available to any Monastery." (29: Yes; 1: No)

(For further details, please see the Crostarosan Newsletter, #39.)

It seemed appropriate to us, the editors, to open your Theological Journal with the retreat conference presented to the general assembly, (May 11:12), by Reverend Sabatino Majorano. Father's opening quote from **1 Tim. 4:14**, set a reflective tone for the assembly.

"You have in you a spiritual gift which was given to you when the prophets spoke and the body of elders laid their hands on you; do not neglect it."

Father Majorano has developed his theme along the lines of three interconnected steps:

- 1) "The Necessity of Seeing with the Eyes of Christ." This means: 'Seeing with hope-filled eyes.'
- 2) "A Gift to Cultivate for the Good of the Whole Church." 'It is indispensable,' Father reminded us, 'to constantly reawaken in ourselves the grateful memory of the gift that has been entrusted to us for the good of the whole church.'
- 3) "Signs from Christ, God's Yes to Humankind." Mother Celeste's "Plan of the Eternal Father" echoes God's 'yes' for humankind; God's 'yes' is love - for "God is Love" (1 Jn. 4).

Fortunately, we have Father Majorano's entire retreat conference for a continued, prayerful reflection in the spirit and theology of Mother Celeste and Saint Alphonsus.

Reverend Emilio Lage is another well known 'expert' in the charism of Mother Celeste, so we are pleased to present Father's article entitled:

"The Spiritual Journey of Maria Celeste Crostarosa."

Father Lage prepared this article for a "Second Convention of Crostarosan Studies" which was held at Foggia, May 30 to June 1st, 1997. In travelling with Mother Celeste through her long and arduous spiritual journey, we will find Father Lage's article to be a sure guide.

The Lord, Himself, was Mother Celeste's guide! Father Lage quotes from her Autobiography: *'Celeste says that the Lord called her "to be His follower even from her tenderest years," and wanted to be "her guide on the way of perfection and prayer."*

This article assures us that the Lord was even more than the guide of Mother Celeste, He was for her: "The Way, the Truth and the Life." Celeste refers to the Lord's love for us as the "madness of His love". She prays that we learn this same "madness of love" for our God and Redeemer.

Our Readers will be pleased that we are continuing to publish the conferences of Rev. Sabatino on Mother Celeste's Steps of Prayer. (These conferences were given at Bielsko-Biala, between 2008 and 2009.) In this publishing we will continue with Father's conferences on –
"Steps Six to Ten" (Inclusive).

We thank the Redemptorists who always pass on, through their conferences and writings, their knowledge and understanding of the writings of Mother M. Celeste. We encourage all our Redemptorist confreres to contribute in this way to our 'Theological Journal'. We will always consider it a privilege to publish articles on the charism and spirit of St. Alphonsus and Mother Celeste, thank you!

As for the Redemptoristines – you are always welcome to contribute and we highly encourage you to do so, please and thank you!

Your editors: Sister Joan, Sister Gabrielle, Sister Magdalena, Sister Ewa



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"You have in you a spiritual gift which was given to you when the prophets spoke and the body of elders laid their hands on you; do not neglect it." (1Tm 4:14)

For a creative, more convinced and courageous fidelity

Fr. Sabatino Majorano, C.Ss.R.

(The retreat day for the OSSR GENERAL ASSEMBLY, Materdomini 9-19 May, 2012)

Do not neglect the gift which was given to you - Paul's recommendation to Timothy is of the utmost relevance to the General Assembly of the OSSR. I would go so far as to say that our work here, will contribute to the creative fidelity of the order, only in so far as we are open to a renewed and grateful appreciation of the charismatic gift which the Holy Spirit gave, to the order, to each community and indeed to every single redemptoristine sister.

I'll develop my presentation in three interconnected steps: the necessity for us, to learn to see with Christ's eyes, in other words, to study the reality of the world with hope-filled eyes, to become ever more aware that the spiritual gift entrusted to us is for the whole church, to recognize the need for our communities to recommit themselves (ourselves) to be *viva memoria* of the love of God in Christ, by allowing the spirit to transform us into his 'living portraits' in order to better enter into a climate of prayer, I propose a return to our redemptorist sources. Therefore in addition to referring to some alphonsonian texts, I'll quote mother Celeste and the Constitutions.

Seeing with hope-filled eyes

Above all we must learn to see with hope and not allow ourselves to be overburdened by fear and discouragement. Nobody can deny that the Order has its problems. We need only to think of the average age of the sisters in some of the monasteries and recall that one or two have had to be closed in the last number of years. There are however positive elements which offer perspective of a future in places like: Eastern Europe, Africa and in Asia.

The words that John XXIII addressed to the fathers at the start of the Vatican council, fifty years ago, could have been meant for our Assembly:

"In the daily exercise of our pastoral office, we sometimes have to listen, much to our regret, to voices of persons who, though burning with zeal, are not endowed with too much sense of discretion or measure. In these modern times they can see

nothing but prevarication and ruin. ... we feel we must disagree with those prophets of gloom, who are always forecasting disaster, as though the end of the world were at hand. In the present order of things, Divine providence is leading us to a new order of human relations which, by men's own efforts and even beyond their very expectations, are directed toward the fulfilment of God's superior and inscrutable designs. And everything, even human differences, leads to the greater good of the Church."¹

In our prayer, we should continually ask for this kind of hope-filled vision; aware that it will only be granted to us if we allow the spirit to inscribe in us the mind of Christ and so liberate us from the calculating attitudes that contemporary society would impose on our minds. Paul's exhortation to the Romans is relevant for us here in this Assembly: *"do not be conformed to the world where you live, but rather be transformed through the renewal of your mind. You must discern the will of God, what is good, what pleases, what is perfect."* (Rm 12:2)

The point, as the same Paul mentioned earlier, is to learn to see and to think like children of God. *"You did not receive a spirit of slavery to fall into fear, but the spirit that makes you adopted children and every time we cry, 'Abba! Father!' the spirit assures our spirit that we are children of God. If we are children, we are heirs, too. Ours will be the inheritance of God and we will share it with Christ; for if we now suffer with him, we will also share the glory with him."* (Rm 8: 15-17)

In this way, we will be more able to contemplate with the eyes of faith, how the modern world affects the life of the Order.

"I consider that the suffering of our present life cannot be compared with the glory that will be revealed and given to us ... we know that the whole creation groans and suffers the pangs of birth. Not creation alone, but even ourselves, although the spirit was given to us as a foretaste of what we are to receive, we groan in our innermost being, eagerly awaiting the day when God will adopt us and take to himself our bodies as well." (Rm 8: 18. 22-23)

Our weaknesses ought not prevent us from taking courageous steps toward a greater living out of our charism. Even as we take certain risks, we should do so with confidence in the spirit who always, *'comes to help us in our weakness, for we do not know how to ask; but the spirit himself intercedes for us with groans that cannot be expressed. And he who sees inner secrets, knows the desires of the spirit praying for the holy ones, for he prays according to the will of God.'* (Rm 8:26-27)

Above all, we could help the members of the Order become ever more aware that our vocation is rooted, not in what we do, but in the faithfulness of God who gives himself to us. *"we know that in everything God works for the good of those who love him, whom he has called according to his plan... who shall separate us from the love of Christ? Will it be trials, or anguish, persecution or hunger, lack of clothing, or dangers or sword?...in all of this we are more than conquerors, thanks to him who has loved us. I am certain that neither death nor life, neither angels nor spiritual powers, neither the present nor the future, nor cosmic powers, were they from heaven, or from the deep world below, nor any creature whatsoever will separate us from the love of God, which we have in Jesus Christ, our Lord."* (Rm 8:28.35-39)

¹ *Gaudet Mater Ecclesia*, in AAS 54 (1962) 789

A gift to cultivate for the good of the whole Church

The pace and the depth of the changes coming about in our world are evident to everyone. We need only recall the processes of globalization, which are transforming social and cultural relations, and which make church witness and proclamation all the more urgent. The preparatory steps for the next synod of bishops and the convocation of the year of faith, are eloquent testimony of this.

“The principle new feature of our world, writes Benedict XVI, has been the explosion of worldwide interdependence, commonly known as globalization. Paul VI had partially foreseen it, but the ferocious pace at which it has evolved could not have been anticipated. Originating within economically developed countries, this process by its nature has spread to include all economies. It has been the principle driving force behind the emergence from underdevelopment of whole regions, and in itself it represents a great opportunity. Nevertheless without the guidance of charity in truth, this global force could cause unprecedented damage and create new divisions within the human family. Hence charity and truth confront us with an altogether new and creative challenge, one that is certainly vast and complex. It is about broadening the scope of reason and making it capable of knowing and directing these powerful new forces, animating them within the perspective of that civilization of love whose seed God has planted in every people, in every culture.”²

In order to be able to discern the signs of the times which the changes in society impose on us, it is indispensable to constantly reawaken in ourselves the grateful memory of the gift that has been entrusted to us for the good of the whole church. This loving and confident memory / anticipation, renews us, draws us into community and turns us into collaborators with the gospel. (cf Phil 2:5)

It is only this grateful memory that can grasp the novelty of the present and respond to it in a constructive way. This is the basis of that creative fidelity that should constitute the central engagement of every religious institute in the world we live in. Suffice it to recall the words of John Paul II:

“Institutes of consecrated life are thus invited courageously to propose anew the enterprising initiative, creativity and holiness of their founders and foundresses in response to the signs of the times emerging in today’s world. This invitation is first of all a call to perseverance on the path of holiness in the midst of the material and spiritual difficulties of daily life. But it is also a call to pursue competence in personal work and to develop a dynamic fidelity to their mission, adapting forms, if need be, to new situations and different needs, in complete openness to God’s inspiration and to the church’s discernment. But all must be fully convinced that the quest for ever greater conformity to the Lord is the guarantee of any renewal which seeks to remain faithful to an institute’s original inspiration.”³

In order to inspire our communities with a creative fidelity, rooted in this ‘conformity to Christ’ the assembly must allow itself to be guided by the Constitutions, the fundamental means of unity for the Order. To quote Vita Consecrata:

² Caritas in veritate, n. 33

³ Vita Consecrata, n. 37

“In this spirit there is a pressing need today for every institute to return to the rule, since the rule and constitutions provide a map for the whole journey of discipleship, in accordance with a specific charism confirmed by the church. A greater regard for the rule will not fail to offer consecrated persons a reliable criterion in their search for the appropriate forms of a witness which is capable of responding to the needs of the times without departing from an institute’s initial inspiration.”⁴

It’s worth hearing again, just how the Constitutions synthesize the specific charism entrusted to us:

“It was the will of the Father that the Order of the Most Holy Redeemer should have a specific role in his church: to be a clear and radiant witness of the love he has for us in Christ. It is through him in fact that we have known and received this love which is directed towards all but in a very special way towards the poorest. In order that our brothers and sisters may be fully aware of the love by which they are eternally loved by him, the Father calls us today to be a living memorial – a viva memoria – a constant reminder – of all that the Son accomplished for our salvation during his life on earth. It is in this way that the Redeemer is able today to accomplish his work of salvation in and through us.”⁵

This text reprises, almost word for word ‘the design of the Eternal Father’ which mother Celeste placed at the beginning of the first rule:

“So that my creatures, then, might keep in mind the never ending love with which I have loved them, it has been my good pleasure to choose this institute to make of it a living memorial (viva memoria), for all the people of the world, of all that it pleased my only begotten Son to do for their salvation in the course of the thirty three years he spent on earth as a mortal man. And his works are always alive before me and they are of infinite value. Therefore you, the souls I have chosen for this enterprise, will be glorified with him on the day of eternity.”⁶

The specific charism of the Order, should be our guide as we reflect and come to decisions. This of course, doesn’t mean that we should isolate ourselves and close ourselves off from the many other gifts with which the spirit continues to enliven and renew the church.⁷ Rather we should be open to them, listen to them, enter into constructive dialogue with them, all the while filtering everything through the prism of the grateful memory of our own specific charism. (cf. 1Tm 4:14)

Turning for guidance to the Constitutions, means first of all taking ownership of their internal logic. To illustrate this, I can refer you to the sequence of their chapters. In order to form a community that is a memorial of the love of the Father in Christ (first chapter), each sister must allow the Spirit to impress on her the fundamental traits of Christ’s redemptive kenosis, so that she can be made into a ‘living image’ of the Redeemer (chapter Two) and a free and co-responsible member of a community where gifts are offered and shared reciprocally (third chapter). That’s why they (the Constitution) require a permanent commitment, both personal and communal (chapter four). The memorial structure of the community will ensure that authority is exercised in keeping with the way Christ himself exercised authority, who

⁴ Ibid

⁵ Constitutions OSSR, n. 5

⁶ Florilegium P. 11 ; cf S. Majorano, *l’imitazione per la memoria del salvatore*, Roma 1978, 181

⁷ Cf Lumen Gentium, n. 4

came, '*not to be served but to serve and to give his life to redeem many.*' (Mt 20:28) (chapter five). All in all they can point the way to that joyful fidelity, conducive to a full meeting with God (chapter six).

In order that the Constitutions be an effective instrument of *creative fidelity*, we must always remember to read them with an effectively evangelical mentality. They are, in fact, as Mother Celeste wrote, 'contained in the holy Gospel'⁸

In other words, it is intended that they lead to the truth of life, which flows from the gospel, who is Christ Redeemer, and they aim to harmonize the common commitment so that it becomes 'viva memoria'.

This reading of the Gospel should be carried out with the church, in the church and for the church. Ecclesial life is a fundamental characteristic of the redemptoristine sister, not only in the sense of walking with the church and drawing from the riches of grace that Christ entrusted to her, but also in the 'diakonia' of remembering which the Spirit asks us to perform. In my opinion, the Order can never forget that the redemptoristine community, according to mother Celeste, doesn't exist in order to serve the interests (even spiritual) of its members, but rather to be a diakonia of remembrance and to be a sign of the love that the Father has for all people; everything is to planned and lived out according to this fundamental perspective.

This of course, requires that we look at our way of life, our prayer, our structures and every other aspect of our lives *with the eyes of those for whom we have been called to be 'memoria viva'*. Redemptoristine discernment always begins by listening to those for whom we are in the church, always taking as our starting point, the abandoned, the poor and the estranged. And here an urgent question will present itself to us:

Are we a convincing sign to them that Christ loves them? That Christ gives himself to them? That Christ continues his redemptive kenosis through us?

In light of this question, we cannot but feel the need for conversion, for renewal, for creativity, for a new launch, both at personal and community level.

But if our reflexion doesn't begin with this type of questioning and this perspective, we'll always find a thousand reasons for staying safe, for maintaining our habits and structures. And we won't even notice that these habits and structures crowd out the charismatic gift entrusted to us. And then Christ's severe rebuke of the Pharisees will apply to us: "*and you, why do you break God's command for the sake of your traditions.*" (Mt 15:3).

In order that the Constitutions become a source of evangelical discernment that facilitate a creative fidelity to the gift we have received, we have to read them constantly in the light of the memoria viva of how the redemptoristine community began and subsequently developed. The data for this act of remembering are plentiful. I'll just draw your attention to the spiritual richness to be found in the writings of Mother Celeste and saint Alphonsus. We ought to appreciate them more than we are accustomed to do. Our Constitutions often make reference to them and insist that we don't read them separately from each other. We respect the requirements of a sound historical hermeneutics, when we take into account the circumstances of their lives, very different from ours. We ought also to avoid any formalist repetition which would lock us into a nostalgic version of the past.

⁸ Cf Majorano, L'imitazione..., 144

Nevertheless, we have to convince ourselves that no truly genuine redemptorist spirituality is possible in the absence of a 'viva memoria' of our beginnings. St Alphonsus and Mother Celeste are the clearest commentary, given to us by the Spirit, on our charism. And by staying loyal to them, the Order can find the unity which is a communion of the diversity of responses to the different situations in which we live out our mission of remembrance.

Signs from Christ, God's yes to humankind

The wariness with regard to God in the name of human dignity and freedom, which the last two centuries have left as a heritage, still weigh heavily on our culture and contribute to the social indifference to, exclusion, even outright rejection of the faith. The lineamenta of the next synod of bishops declares:

"These times are increasingly forcing us to live immersed in the present and in passing things which make it increasingly difficult for us to listen, to transmit an appreciation for the past and to share values on which to build the future for new generations. In this context, the Christian presence and the work of the church's institutions are not easily perceived and, at times, are even looked upon with great reservation. In the last decades, repeated criticism has been levelled at the church, Christians and the God we proclaim. Consequently, evangelization is facing new challenges which are putting accepted practices in question and are weakening customary, well-established ways of doing things. In a word the situation is requiring the church to consider, in an entirely new way, how she proclaims and transmits the faith."⁹

Witnesses to the truth of God's love, which was revealed to us in Christ, are more than ever needed. We remember the sentiments expressed by Benedict XVI in his first encyclical:

"'God is love, and he who abides in love abides in God, and God abides in him' (1Jn 4:16). These words from the first letter of John express with remarkable clarity the heart of the Christian faith: the Christian image of God and the resulting image of humankind and its destiny. In the same verse, saint John also offers a kind of summary of the Christian life... In a world where the name of God is sometimes associated with vengeance or even a duty of hatred and violence, this message is both timely and significant"¹⁰.

The OSSR community has to live in such a way that it becomes a clear and convincing sign of all that: a shared experience of the God who is love, significant and open to anyone and everyone who needs to encounter this love so as to find hope for her own life. The 'redemptio copiosa' reveals to us a spiritual path which can turn our communities into places where God's

⁹ Synod of bishops, XIII ORDINARY GENERAL ASSEMBLY, *The New Evangelisation For The Transmission Of The Christian Faith*. Lineamenta n.3

¹⁰ Deus Caritas est, n.1

'great yes' to human love, to our freedom and intelligence, in Jesus, can be experienced. Faith in the God who has a human face brings joy to the world.¹¹

In other words, our spirituality has to be a response to this desire for communion which is God's plan. As Mother Celeste wrote in the preface to the rule:

"So that my creatures, then might keep in mind the never ending love with which I have loved them, it has been my good pleasure to choose this institute to make of it a living memorial (viva memoria), for all the people of the world, of all that it pleased my only begotten Son to do for their salvation in the course of the thirty three years he spent on earth as a mortal man. And his works are always alive before me and they are of infinite value. Therefore, you, the souls I have chosen for this enterprise, will be glorified with him on the day of eternity."¹²

Ours is a spirituality that witnesses that *God is love who asks to be loved*. It's worth our while to read what saint Alphonsus wrote in the first chapter of *the Practice of the love of Jesus Christ* : "All holiness and perfection of soul lies in our love for Jesus Christ our God, who is our Redeemer...Has not God in fact won for himself a claim on all our love? From all eternity he has loved us."¹³ He wanted to win us over to his love through his many gifts to us, he even delivered to us his only son. 'not content to give us these beautiful creatures, he, in order to captivate all our love, he went so far as to give himself to us. The eternal Father want so far as to give us his only Son ... and when he gave us his son – whom he did not spare, for our forgiveness – together with him he gave us his grace, his love and paradise.'¹⁴

'Copiosa redemptio' invites us to witness that the cross proclaims 'the love he had for us: *dilexit nos et tradidit semetipsum pro nobis* (Ef 5:2). He loved us and because he loved us, he gave himself up to suffering and humiliation and to the most painful death that any man on the earth endured.'¹⁵

Our contemplation is a gazing at Christ, so as to understand, to open ourselves to, to receive more and more the gift God gives of himself, and to be able to profess our faith to our brothers and sisters.

"Although hidden in Christ and scarcely visible to the eyes of the world, our life of adoration, praise and intercession is of itself fully apostolic and missionary ... at the service of the missionary church our life should be an offering for the salvation of our brothers and sisters in Christ."¹⁶

The OSSR communities should profess to everyone that God isn't the limit of humankind, but rather its chance of fulfilling itself, its freedom, its hope. Christ's cross shows us

¹¹ Benedict XVI *discorso al convegno ecclesiale di verona*, in *notiziario della conferenza episcopale italiana* 2006, 235

¹² Florilegium P. 11

¹³ *The practice of the love of Jesus Christ*, ch. 1

¹⁴ *Ibid* n. 5

¹⁵ *Ibid* n. 7

¹⁶ OSSR Constitutions n. 11

that his love can't be blocked, even when we refuse to accept it, because, as St Alphonsus wrote, towards the end of his life 'he wanted that our happiness be his glory'¹⁷

This helps us to appreciate just how central a part of our spirituality it is to say a prompt and trusting yes to God's will, just as Mary did at the annunciation (Luke 1:38) to quote St Alphonsus:

*"If we want to please fully God's heart, we have to conform ourselves totally to his divine will, and not only conform ourselves, but identify ourselves with all God's plans. Conformity means to unite our will with God's will, but identity means in addition, that God's will and our will are fused into one single will, so that what we want is what God wants, and God's will is our will."*¹⁸

Mother Celeste in the fourth level of the 'degrees of prayer' stresses the gift of full compliance with the will of God:

"The loving soul consecrates to him her wishes and desires. Thus, she together with Jesus, offers these to the divine Father by living not for her own preference or desire, but solely to be pleasing to God. ... the good pleasure of God was his robe, the same with which he seeks to have his spouse enrobed. He wants that to be his robe because he does not wish to appear in any other robe but that of the will of God. ... Hence, the soul to whom God has granted the grace to understand that to be united to the life of Jesus is the divine good pleasure, becomes a solid rock. Neither the cross nor the tempest nor tribulations can move it from its centre. This soul would much rather be cut to pieces by all creatures than act on a single impulse of self-will in opposition to the divine will and good pleasure."¹⁹

Saint Gerard wrote in his *Regolamento di vita* that: '*some commit themselves to do this or that, I have only one commitment: to do God's will*'²⁰. And he lived out this commitment till the end of his life: Caione wrote that on one side of saint Gerard's room, during his final illness '*he had affixed a sign, on which in capital letters, we read the following: here we do God's will, just as God wills it, and for as long as God wants.*'²¹

Saying yes to God's will gives us the necessary freedom to understand how much our world needs hope, and how we can reorganize our structures and our way of life so as to respond effectively to this need. This is what St. Alphonsus meant by detachment. It's also an echo of Mother Celeste's exhortation to participate in the redemptive kenosis of the saviour through self-denial.

Saying yes to God's gift of himself shapes how we can give ourselves in fraternal joy to each other. And this is a fundamental aspect of our life. Mother Celeste prescribed it as the first rule:

¹⁷ Condotta ammirabile della divina provvidenza

¹⁸ Uniformità alla volontà di Dio, in *Opere ascetiche*, vol. 1, 286.

¹⁹ Degrees of prayer, IV

²⁰ Scritti spirituali, 146

²¹ G Caione, gerardo Maiella, appunti di biografici di un suo contemporaneo, Materdomini 1996, 136

“Thus you will give your whole self to your neighbour. You will give her your intelligence, by raising up its beneficent activity to the level of my mercy; never use it to judge her, whatever evil she has done. You will give her your memory by pardoning her from your heart and never keeping in your memory the offenses she inflicted and repaying her with spiritual and temporal favours. You will give her your will by loving her from your heart, treating her as you would want others to treat yourself and wishing her every possible good. You will give her your heart with its affections, for the sake of my love, sympathizing with her in her afflictions, her weaknesses and her spiritual and corporal stresses. You will employ your body and your senses for her benefit: your eyes to observe her needs but never to scrutinize her faults and her way of acting; do not pass judgement on her in any matter; your ears to listen to her grievances; your mouth to console her in her afflictions and to instruct her in the eternal truths where understanding of them is deficient; help her and defend her.”²²

This refers to a reciprocal gift made possible by and giving witness to the gift that God has already given us in Christ. This is an aspect of our spirituality that we should never tire of studying and proclaiming. Here we find ourselves on the same wavelength as Benedict XVI in his first encyclical:

“God has loved us first and he continues to do so; we too, then, can respond with love. God does not demand of us a feeling which we ourselves are incapable of producing. He loves us, he makes us see and experience his love, and since he has ‘loved us first’, love can also blossom as a response within us. Love of neighbour is thus shown to be possible in the way proclaimed by the Bible, by Jesus. It consists in the very fact that, in God and with God, I love even the person whom I do not like or even know. This can only take place on the basis of an intimate encounter with God, an encounter which has become a communion of will, even affecting my feelings. Then I learn to look on this other person not simply with my eyes and feelings, but from the perspective of Jesus Christ. His friend is my friend.”²³

In the light of this, our Constitutions reveal all the precious wisdom contained in them: *“The constant contemplation of the mysteries of Christ will develop in us this mark of happy and radiant joy, of simplicity and true charity which we consider a characteristic of our community. We do not seek a rigid structure and austere way of living nor extraordinary mortifications, but we try to live according to the spirit of the beatitudes in an atmosphere of recollection and prayer reminiscent of the cenacle.”*²⁴

In the OSSR, this reciprocal gift of love ought to determine how our communities are structured and governed. It should also influence inter-monastery relations. Mother Celeste’s

²² Florilegium, P.46

²³ Deus Caritas est n. 17-18

²⁴ OSSR Constitutions n. 10

'logic of remembrance' would seem to require this. In my opinion, one of the major tasks before this assembly is to recommend this logic of remembrance to the whole Order as an exhortation to be courageous as we face the future. From this point of view, it seems to me that the Order has to take ownership of the logic of the reciprocity of self-gift, and in light of this, reconsider the autonomy of each monastery. This is all the more urgent in the context of the growing interdependence at all levels of our world today.

All this becomes clearer if we are faithful to the central role the Eucharist plays in our spirituality. On the occasion of the tricentenary of mother Celeste's birth, John Paul II reminded us that:

"Fidelity demands the courage of constantly renewing the forms so that they may be effectively meaningful ... it is a challenge which women in the cloistered life today with particular courage in face of the rapid evolution of the feminine world; your presence and your witness are a precious contribution, so that the way forward of women today may be rich in a profound spirituality which is authentically evangelical. "creative fidelity" calls you today to search for forms which will enable the Order as a whole to take responsibility for situations of necessity in each monastery. The steps you have taken so far should be continued confidently trying to find appropriate solutions which can offer valuable help 'in adequately resolving common problems such as appropriate renewal, initial and continuing formation, mutual economic support and even the reorganization of the monasteries themselves' (Constitutions n. 59)".²⁵

I hope and pray that all this can inspire you in your work at this assembly and contribute to a strengthening of the creative fidelity of the whole Order to the mission it has received.



²⁵ Letter of the holy Father to the Order, n.6

The spiritual journey of Maria Celeste Crostarosa

Fr. Emilio Lage, CSsR

1. Jesus Christ, our way and our guide

On the first page of her *Autobiography*, Sister Maria Celeste says that the Lord called her “to be His follower even from her tenderest years”, and wanted to be “her guide on the way of perfection and prayer: He Himself willed to be her master and guide, even from her childhood, in a singular manner, and with the extraordinary refinements of His divine love.” If she describes “the most liberal mercies” of the Lord, it is so that “every faithful soul would be inspired to follow this divine master, given to us by the eternal Father God as our guide on the way to heaven.”²⁶ This is what Sister Maria Celeste does in all her writings: she explains that Jesus Christ for her is not just a guide, but also the way, just as He is for all souls, because “Jesus the Nazarene has been made the way to heaven, the way of every way for the elect. The divine Father promised Him that no man and no woman would enter into that blessed realm who had not traveled by this way of the God made Man to reach that land of peace; so that He in Himself forms the straight ways for the elect [...]. The divine Father in His Son unites all these different ways, so that He would be the way for all, and except by Him there would be no other way to reach His kingdom.”²⁷

Some of the writings of Sister Maria Celeste are specifically autobiographical.²⁸ In them she narrates her own experience, and presents Christ as the way who leads us to the Father. She also describes the illuminations given to her by God, her ecstasies and visions, her interior trials, the struggle with her own self-love, her weaknesses, the consolations she received and the troubles she endured: an internal journey that culminated in the peace of

²⁶ M. C. CROSTAROSA, *Autobiography*, edited by S. Majorano and A. Simeoni, Materdomini 1998, p. 37 (i.e., the critical edition – Tr).

²⁷ *On the Gospel of St. Matthew. Exercise of the Love of God [...]*, 16th February.

²⁸ For the list of the works of Sister Maria Celeste, cf. S. MAJORANO, *L'imitazione per la memoria del Salvatore. Il messaggio spirituale di Suor Maria Celeste Crostarosa (1696-1755)* (The Imitation through the Memorial of the Saviour. The spiritual message of Sister Maria Celeste Crostarosa (1696-1755), Rome 1978, pp. 104-139. The autobiographical writings are: *The Autobiography*, *Dialogues of the Soul with her Spouse Jesus [...]*, *Ten days of spiritual exercises [...]* and *Novena for a Holy Christmas [...]*. In the texts quoted in the present work, some of the grammatical and orthographical forms have been modernized, and punctuation has been added.

union and her transformation into God. Her account of it develops through the succession of the events that happened, with no pre-established scheme. She writes with the impulse of a heart in love with Christ, often in the form of a dialogue between the soul and her spouse.

In her writings, where they are not specifically autobiographical, Sister Maria Celeste, without placing her own personal experience to the forefront, presents us with a teaching that is valid for all souls: it is what she has lived through her experience of God. Also, so as to teach others the way of prayer and perfection, she adopts a style different from the one she uses in her autobiographical writings. She does not speak here of either ecstasies or visions, or of the illuminations she has received. The tone is serene, full of a great equilibrium, and she does not allude directly to herself. She gives her teaching, combining expositive paragraphs with paragraphs in which she turns to Jesus Christ in soliloquies, but without using the dialogue style, nor that tone of passionate love that we find so often in her autobiographical writings.

2. The Little Spiritual Garden (the *Giardinetto*)

In presenting the spiritual journey according to Sister Maria Celeste, I refer principally to the *Giardinetto*. The work consists of more than 600 pages and is the longest of her writings. When we survey the contents, we can define it as a true and proper commentary on the Gospels. In it, in fact, the author considers the life of Christ and mainly analyzes sections of the Gospel of Luke (1:26-2:16), Matthew (2:1-4, 9) and John (1:1-12, 50), interspersing numerous meditations on other Biblical texts, mainly from the Apocalypse and the Song of Songs.²⁹

Domenico Capone calls these commentaries “spiritual elevations”, characterized by “by a contemplative concentration on truth, or concrete aspects of the life of the Lord or the Virgin, felt as a profound interior life.” Here the style differs totally from the one used in other books, where she comments on the Gospels in the form of briefer “meditations”, “on a point well-determined to be considered for drawing practical resolutions from it.”³⁰ An example of this style of reflection is found in her book of *Meditations*.³¹

In the *Giardinetto*, Sister Maria Celeste lets herself be inspired by the Biblical text, always returning to the fundamental themes. Sometimes she dwells at length on a particular theme, or a particular aspect; at other times she presents an integrated vision of the whole spiritual life, so as to distinguish some fundamental point. The result is that all the central ideas of her spirituality are constantly repeated. At times they are presented in a very developed

²⁹ *Jesus Christ, true life of the Soul, Little internal Garden of the Divine Love, Enclosed Orchard of the God made Man and a Christian soul.* On the *Giardinetto*, see the description by D. CAPONE, *Suor Celeste Crostarosa e Sant’Alfonso de Liguori. Incontri – Spiritualità (per la storia della spiritualità)* (Sister Celeste and Saint Alphonsus de Liguori. Meetings – Spirituality (from the history of spirituality), Materdomini 1991, p. 343-351.

³⁰ D. CAPONE, *Suor Celeste*, cit., pp. 347-348.

³¹ *Meditations united to the Holy Gospels for all the year. For the Advent of the Lord.*

manner, and at other times in a simpler or less accentuated form, so that each one of her affirmations can be corroborated by numerous quotations that complement each other.

I am discussing the *Giardinetto* rather than her other writings because in this work, Sister Maria Celeste describes all the stages of the spiritual journey of the soul, from the call to intimacy with the divine to the culmination of its union with God, developing by interior purification and the gift of contemplation. However, she does not do all this in an ordered and systematic manner. The texts of the Scriptures offer her the opportunity to give long explanations, in a detailed manner, of particular passages or moments on the journey, or to present us with a summary of the fundamental stages, or even returning to the same theme and reading it from another perspective. Moreover, the Scriptural texts are dealt with in such a way as to allow her to repeat or amplify a teaching already given.

3. The Intention of the Father

The spirituality of Sister Maria Celeste is centred on the person of Jesus Christ, the Word made flesh and our Eucharistic food. By means of Him, the Father realizes His “intention” to communicate His Spirit to mankind, so as to deify them and live in them and with them (Preface to the *Rules of the Institute*). In the Preface to the *Giardinetto* she affirms:

“Reasoning souls were made by the divine Father as the dwelling-place of the Holy Spirit and as the seat of the Most Holy Trinity. But since man had disobeyed his creator, the Divine Word, the Only-Begotten Son of God the Father was made man so as to reunite man to God. And Jesus was made the life of man in God.”

This project of the eternal Father is the main structure of the whole spiritual doctrine of Sister Maria Celeste. In this project, all the elements of her spirituality acquire consistency and coherency. As their point of departure and arrival, they always have the intention of the Father and the person of the Word, the God made man. And thus she continues in the Preface to the *Giardinetto*:

“It treats of the interior and spiritual life united to life in Our Lord. It is the life of the Word, the God made man, in the interior life of a truly Christian soul united to that of Our Lord through love and the divine charity.”

This is the central theme of her spirituality, expressed in two equivalent formulae: the life of the soul united to Jesus, or the life of Jesus united to the soul. Moreover, this unity of life is realized “in an exercise of love between the soul and her divine spouse Jesus, in loving affections to that God, the unique lover of her soul.” The Preface ends by announcing a theme that we shall see constantly repeated: “the whole journey of the spiritual life consists in the humiliations contained in the life of Our Lord Jesus Christ.”

4. The main ideas of the spirituality of Sister Maria Celeste

In this Preface we find the fundamental ideas of the spirituality and the way proposed and lived by Crostarosa. The divine life is communicated to the soul by means of Jesus Christ, the Word, the God made man, making her a participant in the same union that her soul possesses with the Trinity. What Jesus possesses through human nature, the soul receives through participation, in such a way that she attains deification. This transformation into God, which begins in baptism with the gift of the theological virtues, is brought about primarily by the Eucharist. The fundamental condition is that the soul participates in the humiliations of Jesus. This participation is preferably expressed by the term “annihilation of self.” In such a manner the soul acquires a divine likeness and is transformed into a portrait, a copy, a living memorial of Jesus.

An example of these central ideas of the spirituality of Sister Maria Celeste is found in the following reflections on the Eucharist:

“The soul, the loving bride, feeds on the flesh of the God made Man, and then participates in the wonderful union that the most holy soul of Jesus enjoys united to God; and through the union that the most holy soul of Jesus, of whom we are His members, possesses with the Father, the Son and the Holy Spirit, the soul, the bride of Jesus Christ, is made a participant in this divine union in this most divine Sacrament. It is a real union, according to that wonderful saying that comes from Him, that is: *Qui manducat me, ipse vivet propter me* (those who eat Me will live through me, Jn. 6:58). And because the soul, the bride, eats God, through participation she has life in God. Here follows another of the Lord’s sayings, which is: *Qui manducat meam carnem et bibit meum sanguinem in me manet et ego in illo* (whoever eats My flesh and drinks My blood remains in Me and I in him, Jn. 6:57).

“Here He declares the total transformation of the soul into God, which is done by means of this most divine sacrament. There are two effects that grace works in the well-disposed soul. The first effect is to be fed with all the virtues of the God made man. When she eats His sanctified flesh she is transformed; in His humiliations, her own self is hidden in Christ Jesus, the true Man, sanctified by the Father; and in His admirable mortification she continually dies to herself; in His pains and crosses she is glorified; in His immaculate purity she is purged again every day. [...] The grace of the Holy Spirit that has united her to the Word, the God made Man, makes her divine in the true God by means of the union that the Divine Word has made with our human nature. So she participates, through the grace merited by the God made Man, in the effects of the most blessed union that the God made Man shares through His Divinity [...].

“In her His Holy Spirit does the marvelous work of His grace and in her heart He builds a throne of love as a dwelling-place for all three of the Divine Persons [...] which increasingly deify and deform the soul into the perfection of the God made Man. [...] And the more she increases in the Divine charity, the more she rises higher in the grades of this divine union. So the more the soul is purified by annihilating herself in God and in her own nature, the more she

becomes equal to God [...] and the more her soul is simplified and annihilated in herself, the more she is disposed for a loftier grade of this divine union. And if she can totally humble and hide herself in the abyss of the humiliations of the Word, the God made Man, she will be totally united and deformed in God (*Giardinetto*, 4th June).

5. The stages of the journey

Sister Maria Celeste knows the traditional division of the three spiritual states (beginner, proficient and perfect)³² or the three ways (purgative, illuminative and unitative),³³ but she does not make use of them and neither does she follow them rigorously.

In the *Giardinetto* (Little Spiritual Garden) she speaks of “those who go by the way of the spiritual life, who follow in the footsteps of the Son of God”, contrasting with those who, having abandoned the Lord “are thus deprived of faith”.³⁴ So she takes only two definite spiritual states into consideration, according to the type of prayer: meditation and contemplation. In meditation, the intellect seeks hard to find God, principally considering the way of Christ. In contemplation, the soul knows Him and loves Him passively with divine illumination and motions. Among the two states, but without becoming a third, we find the purification of the senses and the powers of the soul, whose function is primarily to receive the gift of contemplation and this continues even when the soul is in a passive state.

The difference between meditation and contemplation is understood better from the following texts, where, contemplating on the words “*et accepi librum de manu angeli et devoravi illum*” (And I took the book from the hand of the angel and ate it up – Rev 10:10), she writes:

“But what does it mean when these words say “devour” and not “masticate” unless it means that the soul no longer avails itself of discourses or holy meditations, where the eternal truths are masticated by the consideration of the intellect, but with pure contemplation she devours this divine book, this clear mirror of life, because You are communicated to her in the fullness of a pure and substantial bread” (*Giardinetto*, 11th April).

“So it is that in the beginning, the soul takes the weighed and measured bread of the Divine words, as was done with the people of Israel and their manna. So the soul in the beginning receives as much food as she can understand by consideration, and her powers are satisfied to the degree that the soul is capable of receiving this heavenly food; but it is always

³² “In these three sorts of temptations that you want to suffer, see that you overcome the temptations of the three states of the soul on the way of perfection. The first, of beginners... The second, of proficient... The third, the state of the temptations of the perfect...” *On the Gospel of St. Matthew. Exercise of the Love of God* [...], 23rd February, commentary to Mt. 4:10.

³³ “On this illuminative way” (*Giardinetto*, 4th February); “the soul having finished journeying by the purgative and active way” (*Giardinetto*, 26th March).

³⁴ “But let us leave them, as it is not proper in this treatise to speak of this matter” (*Giardinetto*, 3rd June).

very limited, because it is bread measured out and masticated by the way of discourse [...] And in the same way equally, the soul, when the Lord has given her the grace of passive prayer and she has entered into the state of pure faith, she then enters into the Word of God. There she receives the gift, and the bread is given to her without measure [...] But when the loving soul has reached this supernatural state, she eats of this bread without measure, because the divine words of the Eternal Word are her food; the soul is nourished by that Word of Truth who, having been made a man similar to us, participates in our own nature, as an infinite something who, with neither forms or *figures*, or limited species, nourishes us with every savour of that unique bread that this Word, the God made Man, contains" (*Giardinetto*, 27th May).

In all her writings, Sr. Maria Celeste speaks repeatedly of three states of the spiritual journey (meditation, purification and contemplation). And furthermore, she dedicates a specific book to each of these stages.

6. Meditation

In her *Autobiography*, Sr. Maria Celeste tells us that at Foggia "in the evening the Superior gave the meditation, giving the point while the last half hour was spent in mental prayer, so as to instruct the educandes well in this exercise of mental prayer".³⁵ For this purpose she added a brief method to the *Rules* "so that it would be well established for those who teach and educate the souls who enter this Monastery". In reality, rather than it being a method in the technical sense of detailed and fixed norms, it means guidance about the essentials of prayer:

"They shall attentively read the points of the meditation, and with their eyes of consideration reflecting well on the most solid points of the meditation, discussing with the intellect until such times as the will and affection are moved towards God; then they shall do those acts, to which the soul feels spurred by God, either of thanksgiving, or of grief at having offended Him, or acts of love, humility, etc. And in these acts they shall detain themselves sweetly from time to time, as much as they can, during the time that the prayers last."³⁶

Sr. Maria Celeste insists on the fact that the life of Jesus must be the constant theme of prayer.³⁷ She suggests other themes only when is speaking about educandes generally entering the Monastery at a young age, including children.³⁸

³⁵ *Autobiography*, Ch. 62 E/22.

³⁶ O. GREGORIO – A. SAMPERS, *Documenti intorno alla Regola della Congregazione del SS. Redentore* (Documents regarding the Rule of the Congregation of the Most Holy Redeemer), Rome 1969, p. 103-104, 1st column (Foggia III).

³⁷ "In the beginning when the soul begins the way of prayer and the spiritual life, the first attractions by which the soul begins this internal journey of prayer is meditation on Your most holy life, Passion and death" (*Giardinetto*, 18th January). The soul "follows You at the beginning of her spiritual course with frequent meditations [...] and surveys with mature consideration all Your admirable works that in Your travels, being a wayfarer in this world, You deigned to work through Your love" (*Giardinetto*, 10th

Taking account of the importance that Sr. Maria Celeste attaches to meditation on the life of Christ, we can understand why she dedicates four books to commentaries on the Gospels: *On the Gospel of St. Matthew. Exercise of the love of God for all the days of the year. Exercise of love for Lent. Meditations united to the holy Gospels. For the Advent of the Lord. The Little internal Garden of the divine love.* After quoting one or more verses in Latin, Sr. Maria Celeste then writes a commentary, following the order of the chapters and verses of the Gospel.³⁹

Of the four books devoted to the Gospels, the one called “*Meditations*” follows the method of mental prayer. This refers to the 77 meditations on the text of Matthew (2:1-4, 25) and Luke (1:26 – 2:52) each divided into two parts. In them there is a brief consideration of the theme suggested by the verse of the Gospel, with various practical reflections about the virtues and the obligations of the professed religious. In contrast to the other writings which are clearly mystical and addressed to all souls in general, in this book of meditations, intended for nuns, the approach instead is ascetical and moral, with a particular insistence on the personal effort required to be able to correspond to the graces of God.

7. Purification

Sr. Maria Celeste also dedicates a book to the theme of interior purification. This means the “*Exercise of love for Lent*” where she comments on the Passion of the Lord according to the Gospel of St. John (Chs. 18 and 19). It is a text of great originality, because the Passion of Jesus is the model that Sr. Maria Celeste chooses to describe the interior purification of the soul. In contrast to many books that mainly comment on the physical sufferings of Jesus, this one dwells instead on the essentials of the Gospel narrative, looking at the Passion from a mystic perspective. The soul experiences the Passion of Jesus and Jesus relives His Passion in the soul “just as in the course of these two passions in one, that is, Jesus in the soul and the soul in her love Jesus, we see and are told the great distinction between each of them”.⁴⁰

February). John the Baptist “was fed by a certain wild and bitter honey, which signifies the food and spiritual nourishment with which the religious soul must be fed and nourished, that is, masticating with consideration the Passion of Our Lord Jesus Christ every day. [...] Watch how you conduct yourself; see that you truly apply yourself to the holy meditations on the Passion of the Lord and if you eat and are nourished on this precious food” (*Meditations...*, 18th January).

³⁸ “In the beginning you are urged to give exercises to those who are beginning the meditation of the Novices on the gravity of sin, the end for which we have been created, the blessings of God and then the life and death of Our Lord Jesus Christ.” O. Gregorio – A. Sampers, *Documenti intorno alla Regola* (Documents about the Rule), cit., p. 103.

³⁹ She comments on the accounts of the Lord’s childhood and the beginning of His public life according to St. Matthew and St. Luke. The chapters of St. John 1-12 occupy the major part of the *Giardinetto*. Only the Passion according to St. John forms the theme of the *Exercise of Love for Lent*. In the *Giardinetto* and the book *On the Gospel of St. Matthew* some of the meditations comment on various texts from the *Song of Songs* and the *Apocalypse*.

⁴⁰ *Exercise of Love for Lent*, 17, Friday of the second Sunday.

Each scene of the Passion is used by Sr. Celeste to describe the purification of the soul. For example, her commentary on the capture of Jesus ends with the following reflection:

“Likewise, with the soul, Your spouse, where You, loving Word, go and dwell through love. Your divine life bound the powers of her soul with Your loving bonds. O my love, in the same manner, You bind her intellect, so that with her natural ability she fails at any interior mystic work. Rather, with that inaccessible divine light of Your divinity and limitless purity, You penetrate her and reveal Yourself to her with the simplest ray of Your divine light. It binds her intellect and her memory, and all her external and internal senses are bound by Your divine virtue, Word of God made man, who dwells in the centre of the soul. You are not there to feed her with consolation, but to bind her and hand her over to the power of torments until she arrives at the total crucifixion of love in Christ, who dwells in her. And therefore, infinite lover, so that the soul can arrive at a true resurrection with You, first of all You place her to die on Your Cross, and then, in this soul bound and beset by pains, You live newly crucified through love. And the loving soul is crucified in You, because neither internally or externally is she still capable of receiving consolation, either spiritual or of the senses, so much is she bound by your divine virtues.”⁴¹

The soul that suffers interior purification by reliving the Passion of the Lord, finally reaches death and the mystic burial with Christ in order to be resurrected with Him. In her commentary on the burial of Jesus, Sister Maria Celeste affirms:

“So in this sepulcher the soul, Your loving spouse, is buried, during the time that she lives in this world, after she has received participation in the internal crucifixion, and after You have effected the mystic death in her. United to You, she buries her own self in You, so as to be totally resurrected into the divine and eternal life of the purest and most upright of Beings, in the truth and justice of a true perfection of the life of love in God. [...] and there she begins her true glorious resurrection in You, O word, her life of love. And just as the soul has been Your faithful companion, both in Your pains and in Your sorrowful death, so she participates in Your glorious resurrection in God, who is her sole life.”⁴²

8. Contemplation

Sr. Maria Celeste also dedicates a specific book to the theme of infused contemplation: *the Grades of Prayer*. In this work Sr. Maria Celeste presents a synthesis of her whole doctrine on contemplation, describing 16 grades of prayer according to a prearranged scheme: a general explanation according to the title that she has given to each grade, and a description of the effects or fruits that prayer produces in the soul. In this book the tone is serene and explanatory, but interrupted occasionally by various exclamations of admiration and affection.

⁴¹ *Exercise of Love for Lent*, 7th day, Tuesday.

⁴² *Ivi*, last meditation.

Her intention is openly that of teaching and she says this explicitly. In the *Grades* she makes no mention of either her ecstasies or her visions, or of the illuminations she received.⁴³

The *Grades of Prayer* describe the work that God accomplishes in the soul that has already reached the passive state. A very significant passage about it is found in the Ninth Grade, expressing how the Word “does this supernatural work of divine union by means of a certain prayer that I will call by the name of the possession of God”.

“It is a communication of the Divinity that is shared with the soul spirit to spirit from the being of God Himself to the degree that the soul itself is capable, aided by grace. And so both the spiritual substance of the soul, and the most pure essence of the sovereign Trinity, by an act of absolute divine virtue, is united in a most pure embrace, where the soul enters into the possession of the Divinity. ... So it happens that the soul tastes that most full possession that God has in His own self. [...] The soul is no longer aware of her own self, but feels her God present, in such a way that for the time the said union lasts, she lives the life of her God, and loves with the love of her God, by virtue of the divine embrace received from all the three Divine Persons, in such a way that [...] the soul makes a remittance of herself to her Beloved, giving Him the possession of her heart. Equally, her God gives the soul an entire possession of Him and, united in a mutual possession, He, as a sovereign principle and independent cause, transforms her into His being”. (*Grades of Prayer IX*).

9. The spiritual way and the “Giardinetto”

In the *Giardinetto* (Little Spiritual Garden), Sr. Maria Celeste often presents a summary of the spiritual way, using images and symbols that various texts of the Gospels suggest to her.⁴⁴ I would like to look at her commentary on Jn 6:61-64 (*Giardinetto*, 5th June) in a particular way. After having heard the discourse of Jesus on the bread of life “many of His disciples said: This discourse is a hard one. Who can listen to it?” Sr. Maria Celeste comments:

“This fact tells us with great clarity about the state of certain spiritual people and disciples of Jesus Christ, who, although they have a desire to follow the Lord, nonetheless want to journey by the way that their senses suggest to them, without ever raising up their hearts from the earth, believing they know a great deal, and therefore they do not make themselves little in the footsteps of this divine Master”.

Starting with this reflection, Crostarosa briefly describes the spiritual way that the soul must travel, starting with a knowledge of her own self until she receives the gift of contemplation:

⁴³ Exceptionally, she begins to speak of herself: “My Spouse wishing to declare to me this mode of prayer ... telling me thus ... Then my soul clearly understood...” *Grades of Prayer*, VI.

⁴⁴ Similar summaries, more or less complete, of the spiritual way are found in the *Giardinetto*, for example, on 22nd, 29th and 31st January, 4th and 10th February and 5th June. The whole spiritual way is fully explained from 4th to 8th January, interpreting in the form of an allegory, the coming of the Magi (Mt. 2:1-12). Martha and Mary (commentary on Jn 11:19-20) represent the two ways: the active life and the contemplative life (*Giardinetto*, 15th August).

“The Divine Master has given us His teaching very clearly about what the solid principle of the true spiritual life is. We can see how He has notified us, with great clarity, in those few words in the Gospel, where He says: *if you do not become like this child you will not enter the Kingdom of Heaven* [Mt. 18:3]. In these few words the Lord has given us the whole way of the spiritual life from the beginning to the end. It is here we must begin and here we must end. Here we will declare the solid principle of the spiritual life until the end, so that the soul who really desires to attain a true union with God and a transformation of love in God, will not err from the true and solid way of the spirit”.

What does this way consist of? The point of departure is an attitude of humility that allows us to see the truth about what we really are, and to arrive at this, we need to enter into a knowledge of our own selves.

“The soul who follows her Lord, the God made Man, must, in the fine beginning of her resolution, begin the spiritual way of prayer, virtue and humility and come before God in a spirit of truth and enter the beginning of a knowledge of her own self, and place herself before God, recognizing herself and her failings and sins, and know herself as blind and confess her own blindness, prostrate at those holy feet in silence.”

The fruit of this attitude is the grace of pardon and faith “which is not given except to the humble soul who confesses her faults before her Lord in a spirit of humility. And after this time of life and prayer, having received the grace of faith that enters the soul through the door of humility, she rises with the divine grace to the second grade of prayer when she thus pleases the Lord”.

The soul perseveres in prayer like a child, humbled at the feet of the Lord, “totally confident of His divine goodness, having no faith in herself, and is in the divine Presence in silence and interior recollection. She goes to the school of the divine Master and learns the exercise of the virtues in His most holy life”.

With the light of the Lord the soul sees “her misery and the many things she lacks.” The perfection towards which she is journeying is the perfection of the God made Man just as He appears in the Gospels. If the soul maintains herself always in the presence of the Lord, “like a weak child about to travel, powerless and inexpert on the way and how to climb the very high mountain that is the evangelical perfection of God made Man”, she begins to feel how “a division is appearing between her senses and her flesh. And then she begins to receive the gift of the divine wisdom of the Word of faith. And the Lord goes on making her spiritual.”

Entering even more into humility and the knowledge of her own self, the soul “becomes disposed to receive the gift of faith and enters by it into the gift of pure contemplation, growing out of the limitations of her intellect and natural capacity to receive the supernatural and divine light.”

10. Spiritual infancy

In the text on which we are commenting, Sr. Maria Celeste speaks of the grace of faith, the gift of wisdom and faith, and the gift of contemplation. In order to pass through these stages, which have simply been enumerated, the soul must “make herself small in following the divine Master”, become a baby, be “in her prayers like a child, humbled at His feet, totally confident of the divine goodness, placing no trust in herself, incapable like a weak child of journeying, powerless and inexpert.”

From the Gospel text quoted above, from the repeated use of the word “child” and the attitudes that belong to this (humility, fragility and faith) it is clear that Sister Maria Celeste is talking about the way of spiritual infancy learnt directly from the Gospels.⁴⁵ We are dealing with a way that Sister Maria Celeste proposes expressly in this commentary, but its essential characteristics are present in all her writings: acceptance of her own nothingness, placing absolutely no trust in her own powers, seeking only the will of God in all things, abandoning herself with absolute faith into the hands of God, loving the hidden life and simply participating in the humiliations of Christ by dying with Him on the cross and being resurrected to a new life. The soul accepts this way because it is the way that Jesus Himself lived to bring about the divine project of communicating the Spirit to mankind.

It is also the way that Sister Maria Celeste herself lived personally, and it is proper for this that in her autobiographical writings she often expresses her love and her dependence on Jesus, using the language typical of the relation not just between husband and wife, but also between mother and son:

“I think You are more than just a dear mother to me, both loving and caring towards me, even more than a mother is caring towards her little baby that she holds at her breast. My adorable and dear Mother, what do I have that I will not show You, my consoler?” (*Trattenimenti*, III).

And her Spouse tells her: “See how in truth you are, that is, like a little baby in the womb of its mother, and which lives more in the life of its mother than in itself. [...] Every wayfaring man is like a child recently conceived in the womb of the woman, for, if nature sends him forth prematurely from inside his mother, he dies at birth: such is wayfaring man separated from his origin. Now you should want to be like a child in the womb of its mother [...]” (*Trattenimenti*, VIII).

Also in her non-autobiographical writings the theme of God as a mother is constant. The Father, the Word, the Holy Spirit and the humanity of Christ are all a mother for the soul.

⁴⁵ The expression “spiritual infancy” has become common in spiritual literature in reference to Saint Therese of the Child Jesus (died 1897). In her writings the Gospel text Mt. 18:3 does not appear.

“The soul declares that if she does not enter into the womb of her mother in this most divine Sacrament, she cannot see the kingdom of God. Thus it is, because if the loving soul is not submerged in the humiliations of the divine Lamb and does not annihilate herself and make herself small in her own eyes and hide herself in You in this most divine Sacrament, she will never enter the state of pure faith, and if she does not abandon herself totally made small in the womb of this divine mother of love, supported only by hope in Him, she can never suck the divine breasts of this loving mother in the most sweet union of love” (*Giardinetto*, 13th June).

The example of the baby who still finds herself in the maternal womb, serves to explain the action of the Holy Spirit in souls:

“Just as the baby born and generated in the womb of her mother is given the vital breath of life by her mother and lives in her life, so the loving soul is inspired by Your Holy Spirit, that breathes in You, divine loving Word. So she breathes in the vital breath of love in God; she does not know from where it comes and to where it goes, just like a baby which is enclosed in the maternal womb, because she breathes and is inspired with the living breath; she does not know from where the breath of life is communicated, nor does she care to know. She just lives in that womb and rests there peacefully without the least desire. Similarly, the loving soul, being regenerated and born again in the Word, the God made Man, is purged through many grave tribulations amidst the multitude of the waters, and arrives at the separation of the body of the senses from the spiritual, in the purity of faith, in the darkness of the maternal womb of the mother who has generated her, and breathes and is inspired to a new spiritual birth in the divine womb, beyond all intelligence, species and forms created in her powers. Regarding her intellect and will, she breathes the life of love in God, and her memory rejoices in this loving God in an agreed rest and simplicity in the centre of her heart” (*Giardinetto*, 29th March).

And the action of the Trinity is described by the same image: “Sweet repose in Your womb makes the soul abandon herself in Your sweet womb. She hopes in no other way except despairing totally of her own self, and she lets herself be totally reposed, and gives herself in abandonment into Your divine and omnipotent arms, in the most sweet sleep in Your divine love. There she sucks the precious breasts of God the Father in the womb of her mother, who is You, loving God made Man. There she is nourished by the pure milk of Your Holy Spirit, and full of grace, satiated with blessings, she sleeps the most sweet sleep of love; and her three powers rest” (*Giardinetto*, 28th March).

Sister Maria Celeste repeats many times that the soul who follows Jesus feels the absolute security of being loved and knows it “through experience, not just by faith” (*Giardinetto*, 16th May), because the Word, the God made Man, makes her “find out through experience that she is a child of God, her Father, and through experience she enjoys the most sweet fruits of Your most precious blood and, while still a wayfarer, she is sure of Your inheritance” (*Giardinetto*, 4th March).

11. The madness of love

For Sister Maria Celeste, Christ was her way and her guide. For this reason “we must journey in His footsteps and by the way that He has shown us, a way of total annihilation of one’s own self. Only His will is what we down here must follow, [...] and be content to live and die like this Son of love in the hands of His eternal Father, who is our Parent too, so that there appears in us His own perfect and divine likeness. *Ego et Pater unum sumus* (I and My Father are one – Jn. 10:30). And in this likeness consists the state of the true perfection of the soul” (*Giardinetto*, 3rd August).

And it is the will of the Word, the God made Man, through the “madness of His love” to sculpt “in the faithful loving Christian soul the true likeness that Your loving bride must have”:

“Who could have found such a wonderful way to make an inspired portrait so much like the true divine likeness, such as You have, when in Yourself You made the true likeness of the love of man for his God? You are a man and You are God; and this is why You have so marvelously made the divine likeness in man; and since the loving soul in the proper annihilation of her own self is more like You, and in her self-contempt is more like You, so much more have You made in her, while she lives, Your own divine beauty, which, through You, has come to be such a joy to God the Father, as it is what He in You alone sees in us, His lowly creatures. Eternal Wisdom, this was the madness of love that, when it came from You, You wanted us to go mad too. O true Doctor of the soul, let us too learn this same madness of love” (*Giardinetto*, 31st July).



Conferences on the “Grades of Prayer” (part 3, Grades 6-10)

Fr. Sabatino Majorano, CSsR

Introduction

Beginning from the Sixth Grade up till the Ninth, Sister Maria Celeste points out how the different gifts become an unity in us and bring us to love with Christ.

I find this progression in the sixth, seventh, eighth and ninth. In Grade 6 we have an unified personality who is the fruit of the fact that we are nourished by God. In the seventh Grade it is about having a profoundly Trinitarian dynamic of life, and living in the breath of God. In the eighth Grade it is about letting Christ wound us constantly with His love so that we are nourished by God, breath in God and are wounded constantly by the love of Christ, which brings us in Grade Nine to union with God and the sponsal kiss of God. Then there are the powerful experiences which renew this sponsal union of ours with God.

Sixth Grade

Bearing this in mind, we shall try to approach the Sixth Grade. The title that Sister Maria Celeste gives it is the interior sleep or dream, making it clear that it is God who brings this about in our lives. We shall also study what the response from us must be – and that is, if we wish to encounter God, we must unify our own personality with Him. Being a person who can build this unity is the fruit of grace – which tells us what the grace is – but we must also add that being a person thus unified is our own every day responsibility. While we are still a fragmented personality, in which we have particular moments of faith, and then at other moments let ourselves be guided by other perspectives, we cannot truly encounter God (if I say that as a man or a woman I shall do this, but as a religious man or woman I shall not do it, I am not an unified personality...).

It is this perspective that St. Paul speaks to us about in his 1st Letter to the Corinthians or in his Letter to the Romans 8: each one of us through grace is that member of the Body of Christ, not any kind of member, but a member of the Body of Christ. In Chapter 4 of his Letter to the Ephesians, Paul adds that only those who live as a member of the Body of Christ are truly mature, and then we can attain perfection. A grace that the Lord gives us then becomes our co-responsibility. The point of departure is the desire to encounter the Lord. The beginning of this Grade expresses the desire for this encounter:

“2. The divine Spouse having great compassion on His beloved soul when He sees her thus languishing and melting through love of Him, always comes to her, like a most faithful lover, to restore her in her painful but sweet languors, although her body suffers some harm from it through her own natural weakness; and therefore He, taking pity on the

natural weakness of His bride, strengthens her with this happy sleep of which we will speak here”.^{*}

There are three points: first is the compassion of the Lord towards us – it is a compassion that spurs us to respond to the desires of the heart. Compassion would ask you to understand it the way Benedict XVI speaks of it in *Spe salvi*, in the sense in which, quoting St. Bernard, he said: “God cannot suffer, He is incapable of it, but He has pity...” So in every suffering of ours God enters as He who has pity upon us and it is this compassion which transforms the desire of the bride to encounter Him into letting ourselves be encountered by Him.

We must always see our desire for good as a desire which is not just ours, but in our desire there is God’s compassion. This is because we must always have great desires, so that our desire will encounter the compassion of Christ which makes that desire possible.

The second idea is that the desire for our own life is something that can create unease and Sister Maria Celeste speaks of the detriment caused by our own natural weakness. We must not be surprised that the difference between the desire and what we can actually do, of what we are capable – is living by faith. This is valid for all the dimensions of our own life, not just for that specific dimension of which the Grade speaks – living in serenity about the disproportion between the desire and the reality, knowing very well that in this disproportion we encounter the Lord. Our prayers must repeat every day that great exclamation of St. Gerard, when he wrote as his intentions: “*O God, may I save as many sinners as there are leaves on the trees and grains of sand on the earth...*” Here is this great desire but then comes reality, so we accept what we can actually do. We must be certain that the one who solves this problem is the Lord, and not us.

The third point: The reply that the Lord gives to that desire is an interior reply. Sister Maria Celeste was aware that round about her there was much suspicion in regard to her inner peace, and she was to refer to it repeatedly because the context to which she was called was the context in which Quietism was still a problem. And we must also bear this in mind, because Sister Serafina of Capri, who was the foundress of the Monastery of Marigliano, was accused of Quietism. And the strange thing was that she was the one who was most opposed to Quietism and yet she was accused of Quietism.

So what does this interior dream or sleep consist of? Sister Maria Celeste, after pointing out the difficulty in describing it, then tries to describe it. The image she uses is that she is brought by her divine Spouse to a profound centre of repose.

“C. 6. But returning to our subject, it usually happens to the soul, that after the above-mentioned languor of love, she is brought by the divine Spouse to a very profound centre of peace; and then the powers of her soul are introduced to a restful and quiet silence, but they are so gently absorbed that she does not know where she has lost them, nor at that time can she understand or know what it is that has swept up and robbed her of her soul”.

^{*} Father Majorano quotes from the Italian text of the Italian Critical Edition of the “Grades of Prayer”. I am using the same references to the matching English translation – Tr.

Note the images she uses, because they are something very profound. The first image she uses is the languor of love, which is a particularly powerful experience of love in which the whole person feels herself seized by love. The second image is when she is brought by the Spouse to a very profound centre of peace.

And this centre naturally is the heart, the conscience, where she is brought by the Lord to encounter Him with a particular intensity. The third image is the silence of her exterior powers, which is no longer the reasoning mind, no longer the act of proceeding by reasoning, but is the attitude of loving absorption. And in this situation of love, her own faculties no longer interest her. She is so much taken up by Him whom she loves that all the rest does not count. And then, continuing with that description: the intellect does not reason, and the memory is united with the will in love. And then so as to be able to express all this in real terms – there is the final image – the words that Jesus tells her: *“My heart is a little bed of peace for my bride where my love gives her refuge in her weariness”*... We can say – taking repose in Christ, because Christ offers His Heart for us as our refuge.

This is a very profound experience which Sister Maria Celeste had, but I feel I can express it with analogies. For example, sometimes you find yourself before a very beautiful work of art and you have criteria by which you can assess it and say that it is beautiful. But at a certain point it seems that almost all of this reasoning is swept away by an experience of beauty which has no need of reasoning. Or sometimes you happen to hear some music which pleases you, but sometimes you have this sensation that this particular melody creates a sense of serenity in you, a feeling of peace, but you cannot explain it and you feel relaxed just listening to it. And I think that by analogy we can explain this attitude of living day by day. That means that we must find our true peace in Christ. I am thinking of the moments of peace we experience before the tabernacle at the end of the day.

For Sister Maria Celeste the mystic experience is the one she is describing, an experience which only the Spirit can give us, as we cannot do it by ourselves, but I believe, however, that we can gain the habit or reposing in the heart of Christ; and this is something that we can build day by day by finding our peace in His Heart. We should not seek for peace in other realities, as our peace is in the heart of Christ.

Turning now to that particular gift that lets us understand how to find peace in the Heart of Christ, Sister Maria Celeste mentions three effects of this gift and does so with an analogy to physical rest. What does physical rest do for us? First and foremost it gives us restoration after work, secondly, it allows us to digest our food, and thirdly, it transforms food into the human substance. These are the three elements upon which she invites us to reflect. In the Heart of Christ we are to find our rest from our troubles.

“J. 22. Now then, to explain the first effect of rest from the toil and weariness of the present life that this spiritual sleep causes, it must be noted that in creation, the Lord gives nocturnal rest so that in that darkness all wheeling and dealing will cease and a great silence and quiet would be enjoyed by the world, as the proper disposition for such bodily rest. 23. He works in exactly the same way in the little interior world that He has formed in our soul: He produces a serene but quiet night in the soul in the passive act of pure faith, making sure that there is an end to every clamour of species, forms and phantoms that the internal and

external senses of man produce //24r// from all the created species that they receive into themselves, with a serene and dark passive and simple act of faith, a most general and perfect one. 24. And this He works with a despotic and absolute power in the soul”.

Note the parallelism: the night is for taking our rest, and in the spiritual life, silencing our reasoning mind allows us to take our rest, in such a manner that everything that was hard to understand becomes an experience of encounter. Imagine the experience of two people who wish each other well. They have done so many things to find the moment to be together, they want to tell each other so many things, but when they meet, everything seems to disappear and what is of value and what matters is the fact that they are together, the fact they are happy to see each other and look at each other. Sister Maria Celeste attributes it to this night that brings silence to everything, so as to be able to effectively enjoy the meeting which they have tried to bring about by means of so many words. And she adds to it: it is not ourselves who work it, but Him who works it, in other words, He lets us meet Him in such a way that we have no more need of reasoning. Everything which could be doubt and uncertainty now disappears, because there is this evidence that we have actually met. All the effort counts as nothing, and there is the joy of actually meeting. That is what we also say, even when a Sister asks your opinion about something, and if need be you guess at that moment that the reply will be what it is, but you go to great effort to dispute it, but you are still certain that the reply is what it is. Here is something analogous: all the attempts we make to encounter the Lord, and at the moment when He lets us encounter him, everything we had to do in order to encounter him falls away and we let ourselves be taken up by our encounter with Him.

The second effect: *“M. 28. The soul in this sleep digests all those Divine foods and substances commanded by the Spouse for the soul, the foods of Divine knowledge that have been communicated to her by God under the species, - every kind of supernatural knowledge, by means of visions, revelations, lights, passive knowledge of faith, intellectual speculations on the mysteries of the faith, and above all, the infused knowledge that God imparts to the soul in pure faith according to the capacity of that soul”.*

All this is reduced to unity: *“N. 29. And so, in this profitable sleep, she reduces everything to a simple substance in the sleep of love, and then, through the possession that God gives her of Himself, in the grace of His blessings...”*

Digestion means that we make the different foods become what nourishes us.

It is not only just the individual gifts that happen, to which we pay attention, but God’s project is to be found in everything that we have lived. And we also relive what we have experienced in this unifying perspective. In this manner, when we truly accept all the gifts we have received, everything that we have lived, we perceive how God’s project is becoming ever clearer, and then we can assimilate it and be nourished by it and it becomes our own substance.

We have the sensation that even if we have been active, in reality we have been passive, because God has worked in us. For example, in the history of your vocation, has it been you who has pulled the strings or has it been God? Certainly you acted of your own

free will, but who disposed the circumstances, at times even the trivial ones? Was it not God? And the same can be said for every circumstance, every meeting and every person. We have not been passive in the worst sense, but the fact that by means of this God's project has been carried forward, makes us see that it was He who brought it about. The same with the experience that Sister Maria Celeste describes in her third image, that of being nourished, and I would say with the words: let us notice that in reality we are God's plan and His plan becomes us. We nourish ourselves with God in the fullest sense of the word. We are what we eat and God's plan becomes our reality. It is so true that Sister Maria Celeste concludes this attempt to describe it: *"32. And just as she first received God through knowledge, which is what the food means, now she receives Him in substance, which is the work of this sleep, so marvellously profitable for the soul"*.

At this point Sister Maria Celeste defends this passivity and debates with those who say that it must be looked at with suspicion. And in saying that we need to have faith when we have this sort of experience, and she gives evidence of three consequences of this profitable dream or sleep. The first consequence is that in having this powerful experience that we are God's plan, our passions and abilities are called into this perspective. She speaks of *"passions tamed and quiet"* (34).

When we discover that we truly are God's plan, that we live as God's plan, even what St. Paul calls the struggle of the old man becomes a powerful moment because we begin to desire and see according to God's plan. If I have a personality unified in my vocation, I desire and think as a Redemptorist. If I am truly unified, then I am a member of the Body of Christ, and I desire to serve and not to promote myself. The passions, in other words our abilities to be moved, are illumined by that unified reality that the Spirit has permitted us to experience. The second sign is that in everything we want only what God wants. *"Q. 35. The other most noticeable effect is that the soul feels herself so united to the divine will in everything that it is as if she cannot wish anything except what God disposes, with a wonderful and loving accord with the will of her Beloved in every event of this life, and therefore she lives in great peace through all the vicissitudes of this miserable life"*.

And the third sign is that she has a great desire for charity. She then concludes the Grade by debating a little with those who do not understand this and by pointing out that from this experience there derives in us a desire and love for solitude, for being with Christ, but also a positive commitment to Him, and she then concludes that this is a dream or sleep that gives us the power to journey on.

"T. 44. It should in no way be believed that this marvellous sleep causes the soul that receives it any sluggishness, confusion or depletion of spirit; for this is not what the above-mentioned prayer does; but rather it is a profitable and active sleep that gives power and vigour for journeying forward in full vigour and fervent love".

We need to be unified people much more, making, of the very gifts of God that are so diverse, an unitarian unity in us, in such a manner that we can live by giving ourselves. This seems to be the essence of this Grade, without which, especially in a society like our own, we cannot have a true life of faith. Being persons unified in God's plan is a gift, but also our own responsibility.

Seventh Grade

Sister Maria Celeste speaks about *“the loving breath of the happy life”* which could also be a synthesis of your life *“the loving breath of the happy life”*. The important data are two especially – the fact that we live breathing with the breath of God. This is the fundamental idea, and connected with it is that sense of joy which accompanies this experience. To be able to have a good understanding of this Grade, you have to remember the experience of when you lived for a while in a city full of smog, which you suddenly left, and then moved on to a place where the air was clear. You felt that your breath was clear, and you experienced a sense of liberty and openness. By analogy this is what Sister Maria Celeste wishes to suggest in this Grade. God gives us His breath and in this manner we become open to greater horizons, God’s ones, and we live all this with a sense of life and a sense of joy.

The other aspect is the Trinitarian one which is the background to this Grade and which will be taken up in the succeeding Grades, when there is mention of the kiss. In the Trinitarian dynamics, the breath of God means giving ourselves reciprocally, giving ourselves life, and giving ourselves totally to the other. We participate in this reciprocal breathing between the Father and the Son which is the Spirit. In the initial point which is found in the first few paragraphs, Sister Maria Celeste points out the importance of this gift. It is true what she says, but she is not capable of properly expressing it, so it must be the Spirit who talks about this gift. The opening words make this quite clear: *“A. 2. ...I shall be speaking only about breathing, or to put it more exactly, of breathing in and breathing out, which is a necessary motion for preserving life”*.

Behind these images there are the images which Sister Maria Celeste takes from the Neapolitan language. There is for example, a very famous Neapolitan song, which says that whoever loves a person wishes *“to be next to your breath”*, and speaks of that profound communion of life. It is an important gift for Sister Maria Celeste. And then in the second paragraph she tries to describe it:

“B. 5. And so it must be made known that here the soul is found completely awake and vigilant in her spiritual powers, and her senses are so composed and at peace with the superior part of her soul, that it seems that all of them are made one, although in this prayer they are free for whatever external activity they are required to do, with an admirable composure and gracefulness in every ministry in which they are found occupied”.

While in the preceding gift the response is pointed out, here instead it is the activity – God is the response and the dynamic life, but a dynamism in which the person feels herself truly a single thing. And not only is she active in this being in God, but also at the operative level she discovers herself full of energy, and with not just an experience of unity, but one of peace and serenity. In the centre of this there is what specifies this gift.

“D. 9. And at this time God breathes into her a vital whisper of love which makes her too feel like a breath of life, and so it seems that her spirit takes the vital breath and all her

soul is brought to life in God: so she takes that breath from God and gives her breath to God, and she does nothing else here in this prayer”.

Note: She takes her breath from God and gives her breath to God. And in this taking and giving she feels herself totally filled with life. Then she breathes in God, letting herself be constantly vivified by Him. To continue the reflection we must remember the opening page of creation, when God breathed the breath of life into Adam. Behind it is the Semitic anthropology which sees in this breath the sign of life as such.

We live because of the fact that God inspires us, and gives us His Spirit, and breathing signifies this. Our lives then acquire the same horizons as God. We open ourselves, but we do not open ourselves with effort but with serenity. So it is very true when in the following words, Sister Maria Celeste tells us that this is happiness.

“E. 10. And this process is such a sweet one that if it could be obtained permanently, it could be compared to the happy life in heaven of the blessed. 11. The sweetness of that exhalation of the life of God that she attracts to herself is so great that the purity of this action is impossible to explain. 12. She is given no special knowledge of anything of God, and all we can say here is that she possesses the effect of the Holy Spirit from among the two Divine Persons - that is, among the Father and the Son, in the exercise of His divine love, working in the soul those fruit that are proper to this divine Spirit”.

Then there is this sweetness, this happy life that we acquire, when we breathe and live in the breath of God, with that Trinitarian dimension that Sister Maria Celeste continues:

“12. She is given no special knowledge of anything of God, and all we can say here is that she //27r// possesses the effect of the Holy Spirit from among the two Divine Persons - that is, among the Father and the Son, in the exercise of His divine love, working in the soul those fruit that are proper to this divine Spirit. 13. But above all peace and joy are possessed most wonderfully, so her soul cannot really expect anything else - nor does she have special revelations or insights, because miraculously through divine virtue, her whole soul has life in the living and true God”.

Note that she emphasizes that we, in the Father and the Son, produce the presence of the Spirit.

We find that we are the fruit of the Spirit. We need to go to the Letters to the Romans and the Galatians. Remember that St. Paul says that the fruit of the Spirit are, peace, joy, etc., and this list tells us about this presence of the Spirit in us, which is the gift of the Father and the Son.

For Sister Maria Celeste, what the soul receives mostly is peace and joy. Peace in the sense of that faithful abandonment, in such a manner that it is no longer the conflicting realities that we experience, at least when the gift is a particularly powerful one. What we experience is happiness, the joy that is always a sign of the spirit. We must not forget that one of the negative forms of the spirit is the spirit of melancholy and sadness. Everything flows from this faithful self-abandonment. We experience that we are living in the mutual

self-giving between the Father and the Son. Naturally, the mystic experience is a momentary experience, as she records: *“F. 14. She receives that breath at exactly the same continuous rate that she inhales and exhales: she receives God’s breath and gives it back to Him in an instant; God breathes out and she breathes in; and so through this vital motion she can live a happy life”*.

She receives and gives breath back to God. God breathes and she breathes back, and thus she has a happy life. I believe that when we succeed in living in this profound attitude of faith in God and experience it, then we can truly be happy.

I would suggest reading those pages of St. Alphonsus from *“Uniformity with the will of God”*, where he says that it is precisely in unity with the will of God that we find true joy and true peace.

This sense of liberty in breathing in life from God translates into working well and serenely, which relates everything back to charity, in which the profundity of our relationship with God is never seen as something which takes us away from the service of others, but which liberates us through the service of others. And this may be the essence of the gift that Sister Maria Celeste gives us, this finding ourselves and breathing in the breath of God. And from here flows forth one of the fruit that Sister Maria Celeste then speaks about:

“J. 22. From this are born in the spirit, bit by bit, without the soul noticing anything, and without the soul being able to block them out, certain very sweet words and some profound sighs, that can better be given the name of sighs than called words, because for the most part they are so brief that they reduce to a single syllable”.

From having experienced this breathing in God we find that throughout our lives from time to time this sigh of love for God is spontaneously born, in such a manner that in everything we do, what we have experienced so intensely at that moment remains as something that makes me go back from time to time, in an intense manner, to an act of love and to a word of love. This is the mystical transformation of what were ejaculatory prayers. Those sorts of prayers in popular religious life were the very brief prayers that were said in the different moments of the day. You know this relationship that Sister Maria Celeste had with popular religiosity. In this sense the ejaculatory prayer becomes a thought, a brief but intense sigh of love, and something that illumines everything. Sister Maria Celeste explains the reason for this *happy life* by saying that God permits us to experience how much we are loved by Him:

“K. 24. But what should we believe is the major motive of the delight that arises and overflows in the soul at this time? Simply a clarity that gives its light in the same love by which she clearly understands that the supreme good beloved by her soul is mutually nourished on, and enjoys, the soul’s exhalation to Him. 25. And just as she enjoys Him because He is breathed out by that love and divine aspiration, so He enjoys receiving from that soul the exhalation that she sends to Him as the effect of His self-same love; and so they mutually enjoy this contentment that one communicates to the other in infinite pleasure and love”.

We experience that God not only loves us, but finds joy in the fact that we love Him. Is what we are doing a small thing? It does not matter. What is important is that it is an expression of having received His love and of having given back to Him this same love which He gave to us.

If we wish to develop it, we must go back to that presence in God of Eros for man which is the first part of *Deus caritas est*, the fact that God is waiting for man to give his “yes”, and us finding ourselves not just loved by God, but living in the joy of being able to give back to God His very own love. Here is why it is breathing – it not only inspires (breathes in) but it expires (breathes out). We receive the Spirit, and we give back to God His own Spirit of love. For Sister Maria Celeste it is a particularly strong experience, but it must be a characteristic of all our activities. Let us think of our own prayers – they are giving back to God the prayers of the Son, or giving back to God the intercession of the Spirit. What we give to God is what He has given to us. It is at the basis of the whole Eucharistic economy. We must remind ourselves constantly that God loves our littleness and we must live in the joy of this love which becomes faith in our lives. And then Sister Maria Celeste gives evidence of some of the consequences which are born of this breathing in God.

We find the first fruit of it in sentence 31 and it is simplicity: *“N. 31. The first fruit she receives is a simple and open manner in every action and in everything, reducing her soul to a holy simplicity; and even the positively evil things that she hears of her neighbour she purifies as much as she can; and it almost seems that she is unable to understand the least evil, not simply because she can change evil into good, because for //28v// this she has a very shrewd intelligence, but in a certain way, it seems that everything is purified in her”.*

Note this movement in fraternal life and how important it is. Simplicity in perceiving what the other does can become always finding first of all the motive for good, in such a manner that the defects of the other are not the source of criticising others, but are a vocation of love in order to complete what is lacking in the other. In other words, we do not change evil for good, but the perception of evil is there to complete, overcome and heal the evil. This attitude is indispensable in fraternal life, otherwise we shall finish up by each of us accusing the others. So we have this simplicity of how we look at things, in such a manner that we never let ourselves block out evil, but feel ourselves capable of completing and healing it.

The second effect of this gift is an extraordinary joy. But it is not exterior and superficial, but very profound: *“O. 32. The second effect is an extraordinary contentment, but totally internal, having no pain from whatever trouble she suffers, with everything seeming to her as things of no moment, because she places no value on anything except what she loves; and so she takes little notice of anything else and, because she holds Him so dear and so closely interwoven with her, she possesses every blessing in possessing Him. 33. Moreover, she serves Him with gladness and without the least burden in whatever exercise she is charged with by the divine disposition, without reluctance and very willingly and despoiled of her own love of comfort and satisfaction, even the spiritual ones, through the purity of the love that she possesses”.*

If you read your Constitutions, when it speaks of your penance, I think it evokes this style of life. There is this interior liberty, the fruit of love which does not make us block out our community, but place ourselves within it. The words are very beautiful: “serve with gladness”. They indicate a promptness, an easiness, a joy, not imposing yourself upon the person we are serving, foreseeing the needs of the other, and considering it a favour to be allowed to serve the other. And all this with beauty and simplicity.

Then we have the third consequence which she makes a point of mentioning in sentence 40: *“S. 40. I am so amazed, and just as much bewildered, when I consider Your condescension and infinite goodness, and humbled Yourself to love and give such favours to Your poor creatures, wishing to be closely united and intermingled with them, more closely and intensely than the soul is united with the body, more even than the marrow of the bones is united with the human body”*.

Note: God is more united to us than when the soul is united to our own body, and more still than the marrow is united to the bones in the human body. This points out the profundity of the union which is the fruit of the gift that Sister Maria Celeste calls breathing in God. But what causes an even greater surprise is when Sister Maria Celeste writes in her final sentence that God has done some unexpected things: *“U. 42. Give me permission to tell the truth about You, my Lord, and pardon me the boldness: You have done with Your creatures things we would not expect from the greatness of Your being”*.

Unworthy things of God [*things we would not expect*] in order to bring about this communion in us, what continual marvels of God in whom we are to live! It is a miracle that we are to witness day by day when we notice that not only does God love us, and give Himself to us, but God entrusts His Kingdom to us, because entrusting His Kingdom to us means not just giving Himself up to us, but giving His Kingdom up to those for whom He has given Himself. All this is lived with that serenity and faith that is born of our experience in giving ourselves and returning God’s gift to Him. What Sister Maria Celeste points out to us is this experience. We give back to God what He gives to us, so that we are in His mutual breathing and we do this not as a duty, but as a joy, because in this reciprocal relationship we have the joy of God. This is why she begins with the title of: *“The loving breath of the happy life”*. When we are nourished, we breathe in the love of God and give this same love back to Him, and then we are able to be truly happy. Naturally, this does not make us forget that then, in God’s plan, there is always the dimension of the Cross, because He encounters our resistance and we must make it our burden, but we live it with this faith.

In a single word: our relationship with God is a mutual relationship. But we must always see the differences, because He is everything and we are His creatures, but He admits us into the dynamics of this mutual relationship. In this manner we draw nearer to what could be that even more profound union which we shall see in the Ninth Grade.

Eighth Grade

This is a much easier grade which speaks of some powerful experiences of love which Sister Maria Celeste calls “wounds of love”. The title of it in fact is: *“Of the wounds of love, in the Word, of the divine utterance”*. Two things seem to be important in this Grade: First of all, a powerful Christological emphasis. Christ is the one by means of whom God transmits His love to us. And this right at the beginning of the Grade, and it is stated very clearly:

“A. 2. If anyone desires to know what the mighty arrow is, with which our God has wounded so many hearts, and which are of a number beyond counting, I would tell them as something infallible and certain, that this mighty arrow, with which He wounds the hearts of His creatures, is His Word made human, my Jesus”.

Then it is Christ from whom we understand the love of God. And here too I shall invite you to read what Sister Maria Celeste has to say while bearing in mind *Deus caritas est*, because from this aspect that Encyclical makes the points that we too will be developing.

If we accept that it is via Christ that the love of God reaches us, then Sister Maria Celeste begins to develop a series of most powerful experiences in which the love of God reaches us. Before speaking of these modes, she makes reference to Saul (St. Paul), because it was precisely because of his experience of Christ that St. Paul became the “vessel” of election, as Sister Maria Celeste expresses it. The first manner in which we are wounded is by means of the name of Jesus. And this, Sister Maria Celeste tells us, happens at the most unforeseen moments, even in the midst of exterior actions.

“6. And this is how it happens: it mostly often happens when a soul is in an exterior occupation, or if she is reading or praying, and by chance the //30v// sweet name of Jesus is mentioned; and then to her surprise, she feels herself pierced by a dart of love so mighty that very often, for a brief moment, it takes away her breath, in such a way that I cannot describe where sorrow ends and love begins”. (6)

Then she continues to describe this experience. It is the name of Jesus that arrives with an impact so great that it reawakens in us the profundity of the love that we have received. We know that the prayer of the name of Jesus is a prayer that is widely used in Eastern spirituality. We also know that Sister Maria Celeste is in the tradition of the influence due to St. Bernardino of Sienna, with the anagram of the name of Jesus placed everywhere to recall the Lord. The name of Jesus is the most important name in spirituality. And then she speaks of how the name of Jesus reaches us with all its evocative force, in such a manner that it reawakens love within us and puts us into an attitude of love. And this, continues Sister Maria Celeste, happens not only with the name of Jesus, but also when we hear anything else that reminds us of Him. They are words that awaken love, as Sister Maria Celeste tells us. And then, developing it further, it is not simply the words, but also the look in His eyes and any other way in which we relate to Christ...

It "...is the mighty arrow with which He wounds those that love Him, but this arrow wounds us differently in many different ways: it wounds us with the word of His mouth, it wounds us with the looks in His eyes, it wounds us with His beauty, it wounds us with His hands, and wounds us with His heart. And all these different species of wounds make the divine Word human".

And then we have these unexpected moments of love reawakening in us. The Spirit can never fail our lives, when it reawakens in us the love that we have experienced, and we respond to the love that the Lord brings us. We are certain that God loves us, but there are moments in which some words of the Gospels, or just the name of Jesus, make us feel this love vividly within us, and this is what Sister Maria Celeste wishes to point out to us. And then she continues on with another series of these experiences – in homilies, in other events and in all the effects of these wounds. Her reply is made in sentence 18: *"...when the soul is engaged in prayer or in whatever other //31v// occupation, she suddenly hears a voice say a substantial word at the centre of her soul, as if saying: "Love, love", or else: "My bride, only for Me" and similar things, or other sorts of things, which as soon as the soul receives them, we can say that she receives an arrow of love that passes through her heart and wounds and hurts her with a living charity".*

I always remember the love of Mary Magdalene – Mary who recognized Jesus when she was called by name. We hear so many words of the Lord, but sometimes these words have the effect of striking us within and making us feel truly loved. And not only the words, which are the principal way in which we are wounded, but also by another series of experiences.

Sister Maria Celeste develops them in the following paragraph. What I wish to draw to your attention is when she begins to speak of the beauty of Jesus wounding our hearts. It is the beauty of the creation that makes us appreciate the beauty of Christ and we have this experience of love, and then she develops this idea.

"N. 36. The second manner that the Spouse uses here to wound the soul with His beauty is when He lets the soul see, through a vision of purity, the beauty with which the soul of the Word is adorned with //33r// virtues, and the features of His beautiful humanity, adorned by that most excellent soul, filled with all the perfections. 37. And this vision is so penetrating and adorable that it is enough to make the soul become all one hurt and to wound her everywhere and to burn her and set her all aflame with the fire of the Holy Spirit, both in her spirit and her senses and everywhere".

As for what is important – remember how Sister Maria Celeste in her "Dialogues" speaks of the virtues. The virtues are the beauties of Christ that the Spirit implants in us when we experience an aspect or a trace of the virtues of Christ, and ignites love so as to set us all on fire with the Holy Spirit. This Grade continues by describing other examples of these experiences, but the dynamics are always the same. It is something, either when we are in prayer or in our other activities which make us feel loved and therefore in need of love. And this for each one of us according to who and what we are, and our mentality. And I was struck by how when she speaks of the beauty of Christ, she speaks primarily of the beauty of nature. And then she speaks of the same beauty of the Word. In this manner the

soul is placed in a constant loving attempt to encounter the Lord. Naturally all this is always in Christ. It is so true that before concluding this Grade she once again emphasizes this Christological dimension...

“W. 64. However I have forgotten an essential circumstance, and it is that the above-mentioned wound of love is usually given by God to the soul by His Word made human, who is always the door by which the soul enters into God. 65. And God is given to the soul by this means”.

And this emphasis is especially in holy communion, because Sister Maria Celeste’s entire spirituality has this Eucharistic dimension. It is by means of Christ, the “Word made Human”, by whom God communicates His love to us, and the place where we have the most powerful experience of love is always the Eucharist. And then she makes use of that other image which must be dear to you – and that is the seal of life. In the Eucharist the Spirit imprints the image of Christ within us. By means of these diverse and most powerful experiences of His love, we become restructured in His image. And it is His love which makes us become love. This is the perspective in which Sister Maria Celeste invites us to journey on. It is important for us to get used to never losing those moments when the love of God can be experienced in a more powerful manner. It is not possible for us to create these experiences, but when the Spirit gives them to us, we must guard them and make them the power of our journey.

And now we arrive at the Grade which is the final part of this group – the Ninth Grade, in which she speaks of the sponsal union of the Word made Human.

Ninth Grade

And now we have arrived at the Ninth Grade, *“Of the chaste embrace, loving and pure, of the Divine Spouse, and the kiss of purity”*. So before trying to go through this Grade, I would like you to have two things with you: The first one, if you remember in the Prologue to the Rule, how Sister Maria Celeste describes the work of Redemption. God’s plan is the plan of communion. It is so true that she sees the Cross of Christ as the Spirit being given back to us. God then is not just a Person, but a person who gives us His communion.

And this is something the community needs to remember forcefully. Remember, when you reflect on your vows: the first vows, the one that supports all the others, has to be the one of chastity, or rather, not the one of chastity – because Sister Maria Celeste does not use this term – but of purity. In other words she witnesses that God is a Person who gives us His communion. So this Grade must also be born in mind when you read the Prologue, and when you think of the category of the *memorial* which is essential in our lives.

The second thing which is prominent in the whole Grade is this communion called reciprocity. It is not just something that God works, but something we give back to God. It is a mutual kiss, a mutual embrace. The language is that of the mystics when speaking of the union of the soul with God, and we should not be surprised at this language. But Sister Maria Celeste emphasises this reciprocal action between ourselves and God. The starting point in this Grade is that those *wounds of love* of which we have spoken, which become like the seals of love on the soul, inflame our desire for union. Sister Maria Celeste says that with those wounds of love “the soul ... upon whom she feels her heart exists for no other object than for Him” (2). For this reason she too fires the arrows of love at her Spouse: “3. *And next she throws out to her Beloved as many wounds of love as there is breath in her body and the looks of her eyes, meaning by them the eyes of her soul, which she keeps fixed almost continually on her Beloved. 4. And it is very right for her to do this, since she loves Him with so much love”*.

Note these powerful experiences of being loved by God. They leave her striving after God, and from her side she fires the bolts of love herself and that reciprocity is created which we have mentioned: “5. *And so in His turn the divine Lover also comes to receive some wounds of love from His beloved; and then, obliged by His kindness alone, He frequently comes for a mutual union and embrace with her, giving her the kiss of the sacred union of His most pure and divine being, so much desired by the sacred Bride in the canticle”*.

What seems wonderful is that Christ feels obliged. But obliged not by justice but by kindness. This obligation is an obligation to letting Himself be encountered, being united with, and being embraced by His bride. And this encounter, this embrace happens with that gift that Sister Maria Celeste calls the *“possession of God”*. “6. *He brings about this supernatural work of the divine union by means of a certain kind of prayer that I shall give the name of the possession of God”*.

The possession of God tells us both that God gives Himself and that the soul gives herself, in the active and passive sense. Our life is in following Christ. The initiative comes from Christ who attracts us to Himself with some of the most powerful moments of love in

our lives. This striving produced by His love for us becomes an obligation for God to be given another love, and let Himself be encountered. God places a right to Him within us. Not a right given by justice. But in as far as this love is out of satisfaction, * the term that returns many times in Sister Maria Celeste is the reflection on what God does.

Looking at a passage in another writing: In the *Dialogues* Christ speaks of the love of satisfaction in regards to His own images which are us. Since we have become children in the divine Son, we have the right to the Father's love. But this, naturally, does not mean that we place ourselves in competition with God, but that His love is so great as to create in us this right to the love which He gives us. In order to make this clear I shall use another line of reasoning. When St. Thomas reflects on sanctifying grace, he asks himself if grace is a habit. In the anthropology of St. Thomas, in order to be able to act, we must have the power, i.e., the capacity, of the *habitus*, i.e., that the power must be formed in a certain manner, and the act. Therefore the *habitus* means that I have the intelligence and the capacity of understanding things well, but my intelligence, if it is to be able to understand something, must develop that capacity for understanding something. For example, I must first learn a language if I want to read a book in another language, otherwise I shall fail. This is the *habitus* according to St. Thomas. Then St. Thomas says: Is it enough that God is not me and I can act? St. Thomas' reply is – no, grace is an *habitus* because if you perform supernatural acts only passively, they will be imperfect in regard to natural acts. If grace was only the Holy Spirit with me, it would be the Spirit working, and not I, yet the Spirit is the one who works, but He works by giving me a supernatural *habitus* to work with according to His impulse.

Then God perhaps needs us to be the ones who act, but the opportunity for acting is a gift from Him. For this reason I can attribute good works to myself, but to myself as the receiver of the gift which is grace. What Sister Maria Celeste tells us about this gift is that God gives us powerful experiences of love so that we will fall in love with Him, so that through His gift, we become people who have the right to His love. Note this anthropology, this vision of being human, and how important it is in connection with those pessimistic visions of the Christian faith. *"I no longer call you servants but friends, you have not received the spirit as slaves, but as sons in whom we say Abba Father"*. And in that same passage St. Paul says: *"the Spirit with our spirit witnesses that we are children"*. In other words, the voice of our conscience has become the voice of the Spirit. It is important to understand this reciprocity which we find ourselves in through this gift, not as something by which we can glorify ourselves, but as a gift which places ourselves before God as His children.

The gift in this Grade is: All this striving receives a reply – God gives Himself to us in our possession – He lets Himself be possessed by us. Naturally I ask you to be careful not to interpret the categories juridically, as it is the analogies that we are making. God gives Himself to us, so that we can say to Him: You are mine, with all the profundity of this adjective. We see what it means when St. Gerard wrote a very lovely letter: *"You must pray that this time God will do our will so that He may help this Sister serve the community"*.

How can this gift be described and when does it happen? The first thing that Sister Maria Celeste points it out is that this possession of God, or this being filled with God,

* Italian *compiacimento* – satisfaction, in the sense of being happy about our own success, or somebody else's success – Tr.

happens mostly in holy communion. And then the terms used by Sister Maria Celeste become quite extraordinary, because she is speaking at this moment of the communion brought about by the Spirit which *“it is a communication of the divinity that Spirit to spirit, is transmitted to the soul from the very being of her God”* (see 10).

And a little beforehand she said: *“with an illumined faith she sees Him, that supreme goodness, all complete, without division, and all within her own heart”* (9). Then there is the pure faith that lets us see God, but not just God in Himself, but God as He is in our hearts. When she describes this she concludes with some words that one of the censors of her Process of beatification said: This is imprecise and she should have made it precise: *“11. And so both the spiritual substance of her soul, and the most pure essence of the sovereign Trinity, by an act of absolute divine virtue, are united in a most pure embrace, where the soul enters into the possession of the divinity, in such a way that this union is begun in the soul by whatever it is infused by God Himself, communicating to her directly the very knowledge with which God sees Himself and at the same time loves Himself. 12. And so it happens that the soul tastes that most full possession that God has in Himself”*.

Then there is this experience: *“the soul tastes that most full possession that God has in Himself”* (12). Here in our line of reasoning we cannot go much further because this experience is one of fullness, the full process of immersion in God, which she lives in a very powerful manner. But this is what the Eucharist does in our lives. When we say that the Eucharist transforms us into Christ, this is what she experienced in this very profound manner. And all this becomes so strong an experience of love that we no longer notice ourselves but feel God:

“E. 15. And so it happens that the soul no longer feels herself in her own self, but feels her God in His own self, in such a way that, for the time the said union lasts, she lives the life of her God, and loves with the love of her God, in virtue of the divine embrace she received from all the three Persons; in such a way that, in this prayer, when her soul gives her free and loving consent to her God, by that consent, she consigns herself back to her Beloved, giving Him possession of her heart”.

Note that in this experience we have only looked at the words that she herself has said. She is living the life of her God, is loving with the love of her God, and in this prayer she makes a free and loving offering to her God, giving Him *possession of her heart*. This is the high point of the encounter and the communion, but it is also something else: *“16. At the same time God gives her soul the entire possession of Himself and uniting in a mutual possession, He, as the sovereign principle and independent cause, transforms her into His own being”*. Then God gives Himself and transforms us into His own being. I repeat, I believe that we cannot use reason much here, because they are very profound experiences and we must give a theological line of reasoning if we are to say anything important. I think, however, that what must be our task is loving with the heart of Christ, seeing with the eyes of Christ, and seeing Christ more than our own selves. These are perspectives that become a daily goal.

We have already spoken of the memorial that we must have in our hearts, and which we must construct in that perspective. Here Sister Maria Celeste naturally mentions

the particularly intense gift that she has experienced and which the Spirit also wishes to give her in different manners. And then she seeks to describe this experience, using three images and attributing each one of them to each of the Three Divine Persons, in other words, the embrace, the kiss and the possession. This relationship with God is an embrace, which is what we are given by the Father. Sister Maria Celeste describes it as:

“19. This act proceeds from the Father to whom the power is attributed, and so He attracts the pure substance of the soul to Himself, receiving her into Himself, uniting her to the dependent property of the spiritual being that the said soul has from Him Himself; and so the embrace is attributed to the Father as His own operation”.

When I read this, I go straight to that embrace of the Father, in the parable of the merciful Father, because I am convinced that according to the dynamics of the parable it is not the Son who returns home, it is the embrace of the Father which lets him return home. It is very true that it is not the son who embraces the Father, as he does not even have the courage to look at him. It is the Father who welcomes him and embraces him.

And here I think we need to reflect somewhat on the aspect of the virtue of mutual acceptance. So the Father gives us a kiss, and the Son gives us a kiss. But what does the kiss mean to Sister Maria Celeste? It means that Christ is attracting our will totally.

“G. 20. The second act proceeds from the Son, and this is called the kiss in which the Word, the uncreated wisdom, is communicated to the soul in a species of kiss, because He touches the soul only briefly and in passing with what He gives her, but it is highly charged with divine knowledge; and as far as the soul is capable of it in this life”.

He attracts us totally to Himself. He is the kiss, while what the Holy Spirit gives us is more ample and more complex, and it is the possession of God. The heart of this line of reasoning is found in sentences 22-24:

“22. It is appropriate to give to this divine Person the work of the act of possession, that here is the consequence of the soul in God and of God in the soul, because this is really what happens, and in fact the Holy Spirit, with the effects of superabundant grace, has breathed onto the soul that breath of love that proceeds from the Father and the Son. 23. And so with this inscrutable act of infinite love, He has attracted the will of the soul to Himself with the same union with which He proceeds from the Father and the Son. 24. And so the soul’s will gives this divine Person her consent to His judgement alone; and He, immediately when He has received this consent through the deliberate act of her will, takes possession of all the spiritual substance of her soul and at that moment unites the two purely spiritual substances to the divinity, giving the soul possession of the same God and giving the same God possession of her soul”.

This is communion: the Father who embraces us, the Son who attracts us to Himself with His kiss, the Spirit who gives us the possession of God. Naturally, Sister Maria Celeste becomes more precise: the possession that God has is different, and different from our own possession of God.

“26. This blessing is in the possession of God that the soul feels, different from that possession that God has of the soul, meaning that God has joy in His own self, that is, in His own being and satisfaction with His own self; and He also enjoys uniting the pure substance of the soul to Himself, converting her into His own refuge,

where He makes her feel the abundance of His riches and blessings in such a possession that, if the soul, after she has received this grace, was granted the power to speak with the language of the flesh about the concepts in her soul, she would say words of wonder to all creatures. 27. But what! Even if she had the tongues of all the reasoning creatures that ever have been, are now and ever will be until the end of the world, what use would they ever be to her...”

Here there is this full sense of participation in the possession of God with all its riches. In contrast to the others when she speaks of the effects of this gift, Sister Maria Celeste concentrates on describing the gift, adding that the profundity of this communion remains constant and is then expressed in the most intense acts of love.

It is a Grace to be mediated on just step by step, because it is one of those where she gives a major description of an experience which she knows it is difficult to express in concrete terms. I shall continue on with this in our daily task by mentioning the three attitudes that we need to develop. God does not want us to be passive. He wants a mutual exchange of love with Him, a reciprocity which is also His gift. So great is the esteem that God has for our liberty that He always seeks for the “yes” of our liberty; even when He gives all of Himself. He does not do it by crushing us with His gift, but by seeking the mutual exchange of welcome and reply. So the question I am asking you is: if God relates Himself like this to our liberty, what is the relationship that we ought to have to the liberty of others? I have the impression that many times where God respects, we seek to overwhelm. I believe we must go back to this sense of profound esteem for the liberty of each one of us, not because liberty must be libertinism, which is foolish, but because our liberty has the opportunity of being revealed and decided as love. The second attitude that I think is also important is the love of satisfaction which we must greatly develop, so that it becomes faith in ourselves as a reflection of the faith that God has in us. If God has satisfaction in mankind, then we too can believe in ourselves and not be discouraged and cynical. I will translate it into simpler terms. If God has faith in me through love, can I not have faith in myself? It is not a faith which is individualistic and enclosed upon myself. It is a reflection of the faith that God has in me. In finding this reflected faith, God’s faith in us corresponds to something that psychology also highlights today. If a child never receives any sign of trust on the part of adults, he will always be a little insecure. We have faith in ourselves because we can see signs of this faith in the eyes of others, the way God does, and we try again to relate to God – the love of satisfaction. This look which smiles as it watches over us, even when we have our limits, permits us to open ourselves to that fullness He wants to give us.

The third suggestion is never to be afraid of loving God. Sometimes when we look at our limits, when we look at the times we have been unfaithful, we get close to being afraid, but then we must set our hearts free. Because, when Christ gives us something of His love, He asks us to respond with love.

Remember how St. Alphonsus told us that we must do meditation? We must read something and reflect on it so that we can set our intelligence in motion, so that it can set our heart in motion, but when our hearts begin to speak, we must stop thinking of different things and set our hearts free to speak, being concerned only first of all to finish the meditation, so we conclude this meditation with a commitment to being with us for the day.

To sum up: God has a plan of communion with us; so let us not refuse this communion, let us be taken up by this love that is offered to us, and never doubt His plan of communion, so that our lives can be lives in which we can irradiate His joy. God offers us a communion that includes His embrace, kiss and possession. This is just a little of what I have found in this Grade but I have meditated on it this way because it is more a narrative than the other ones.

Grade 10

In Grade 10, what Sister Maria Celeste writes leads us to consider some of the gifts that have been mentioned from time to time. And in reading her writings we immediately notice that this part of the Grades is one that has been less developed by her. My hypothesis is that she did not have the time available to elaborate this third part of the Grades as she did in the two preceding ones.

It is symptomatic that in one of the next Grades she begins to speak of three consequences of the gift, yet only speaks of one of them. In the tenth Grade the discourse considers the fire that the Spirit places in us, in other words, the fact that the Spirit permits us to transform everything into love and be “impatient” for love. Naturally, “impatient” is enclosed in inverted commas.

At the beginning there is a reference to the words of Luke: “A. 2. *In this chapter we need our most sweet and divine master to speak in those most substantial words where He says: “Ignia veni mittere in terra – I have come to bring fire to the earth”. [Lk. 12:49].* And Sister Maria Celeste interprets this fire as the fire of the Holy Spirit. It comes to inflame and burn hearts with the fire of the Spirit. Presupposed in receiving this fire is the spousal union of the soul with Christ.

“4. So given the union and the wedding made between the soul and the Word of God made man - because all these graces that we have previously mentioned have all been given to the soul by the God made man, who is the door by which she enters - the soul thus being in possession of the divine union with the Word of God through love, she often lives in the pure fire of the Holy Spirit”.

Two things seem important. The first is the presupposition of that union for receiving the fire of the Spirit, because there is this close nexus of the graces that always come to us by means of the Word of God. The second is this experience of the fire of the Spirit. According to Sister Maria Celeste, it happens often, in other words, it is repeated from time to time. The place and the moment where we generally experience this fire is in communion. And here, then, we are not speaking of a gift that is received once and forever, but a gift which, when we receive it, is a powerful moment for feeling its consequences, and then it is renewed from time to time by the Lord. For this reason, Sister Maria Celeste immediately adds, we must be concerned not to place obstacles in the way of the Spirit.

“C. 5. And this act is only granted to souls much purged in the spirit, in such a way that the divine Spirit will not find a positive impediment, in order to give her this loving touch.”

So then our task is not to place impediments to the Spirit. But we must not think that it is our task to obtain the gift. The parable of the foolish sower tells us that it is God who gives. I always call this parable the parable of the foolish sower, because he does not measure anything. There is the earth ... but no, he scatters in abundance. Then God has the initiative, and He gives and gives with abundance. We must not cause a positive

impediment, because if somehow we do not let our will close out and bar the gift, then the winners will be those realities which we still have in our lives.

A slight digression. I believe that we must give the most love to the risk that is the Spirit in our lives. If we want security, we shall prevent the Spirit from acting. And we need discernment because it is not always the Spirit that we experience, as we know very well, but then it is the Spirit which always calls us to go further and take risks. For example, at the moment of your vocational choice, you did not choose the most certain reality, or the most secure, but the most risky one. The Spirit calls us to what seems impossible to us, but when we entrust ourselves to Him, it becomes possible because He permits us to make it so. So we should not be timid people seeking security, because this means placing an impediment to the action of the Spirit. This attitude seems important: not wanting to bring the Spirit into our schemes, but letting Him guide us, knowing that if we entrust ourselves to Him, this is our security. And therefore not placing impediments. Sister Maria Celeste then adds that these special moments in which we experience the Spirit, and His ardour, quickly pass, but what is left in us is a vital act, the vital inspiration which the Spirit gives us by means of that gift. And we should be vigilant, so that we do not extinguish that something in our lives that has arrived from that moment.

On this basis, seeking the best way to express this ardour of the Spirit, Sister Maria Celeste then sets it in the context of the Trinity in whom the gift is made.

"7. This happens so that the soul may enter the Word of God and all His powers in the pure substance of the most blessed Trinity, where she finds herself between the Father and the Son in the breath of the Holy Spirit, and in Him loses any worldly knowledge".

What struck me was that the Spirit places us in the Trinitarian dynamics, that Trinitarian foundation which is a valuable part of Sister Maria Celeste's journey. This experience of God is above any human reasoning and this is a synthesis of truth and charity. She says: *"8. In a pure act of truth she burns with the living fire of charity, and all of it is the flame of eternal life..."*.

The Pope in a recent encyclical has turned the text of St. Paul on its head. While St. Paul speaks of the truth of charity, he speaks of the charity of the truth. There is a passage where he explicitly tells us that. Naturally, there is always this reciprocity between those things. For Sister Maria Celeste the truth becomes charity, or rather, in the truth, charity is revealed. Our truth is charity.

I always ask students never to use "we love", but "we are love", because we are reciprocity, we are the image of God, and therefore we are a link of love with God and we are reciprocity between us and are members, the one of the other. So "we are charity" because charity is the truth of our being. In the western spiritual tradition: we must be much more open to the oriental point of view in this sense. Fundamental is feeling we are charity, experiencing charity. And this is what the Spirit does. It is not a virtue that makes me perform acts of love, but it is the authentic expression of what I am. Love is the truth of my being. And St. Augustine invites us to think along these lines. Remember that St. Augustine had that very lovely image that love is the specific weight of the Spirit, i.e., it is

that dynamism which brings the Spirit to its proper place. And he had this in mind when he said: If I put a stone in the water, the stone sinks. If I pour oil on the water, the oil floats on top, because weight brings everything to its proper place. The weight of the Spirit is love. It is this profound wisdom that I find highlighted in Sister Maria Celeste's text – our truth is charity.

What happens when we receive this experience that our truth is love, love received and love given? The consequence is feeling completely set on fire by God:

"10. And yet there is a fire that enters into all the internal parts of her spirit and burns so fine with living charity, and consumes her whole soul so powerfully with its divine ardour that she is born into a new life: like a burning phoenix she dies so as to live another perfect life of heavenly love, where she is both lovable and divine, so that she can do nothing else but love in that love with which the Father loves the Word in the Holy Spirit, and the Word the divine Father in His infinite joy".

The last phrase is what matters: We experience loving with the same love with which the Father loves the Word of the divine love and the Word loves the Father. Here is the new commandment: "Love as I have loved you". Here "as" does not mean "as" in an example, but "as" meaning "in the same way as". In other words, with that love with which I am loving you – which is Sister Maria Celeste's first rule. We must remember this, that we are not giving our own personal love, but our love which is the act of love that we make together in the Eucharistic species, and so we are giving the love which God bears for us. This sacramental vision of love is what we must always bear witness to. The consequence of this is self-annihilation. Sister Maria Celeste tells us this in very clear terms. When I live like this I notice that I no longer find myself in my love, but I find only the love which is burning within me and reaches out to others:

"D. 11. And in this union the soul no longer finds her own self, practising in a passive way a sublime act of annihilation, so excellent that it is not possible to explain it in a human language, but is just like the Seraphim, who, living transformed into God through love and burning continually in this heavenly flame, continue to exist in the same perfect annihilation".

What seems important to me is that we no longer find our own selves – we find the love of Christ which spurs us on to give ourselves and makes us the gift. It is that "*urget nos*". Remember the phrase in St. Paul: "*caritas Christi urget nos*" (Let the charity of Christ urge us on), which St. Alphonsus later took as the basis of all his "*Practice of loving Christ*". The whole moral life is not the fruit of a duty, but the fruit of a love that spurs us on, and encourages us to do so.

The effects of this gift: The first effect, I believe, which is also emphasized in the charismatic movement, is the praise of God, and the second is a desire for the Lord to be beloved by all. Sister Maria Celeste highlights the connection between these two – praise and the salvation of others. And we must never separate the praise of God from the salvation of others. They are not two different things, even if we live them as separate moments. They are an unity. When salvation reaches others, then there is the praise of God

and it happens precisely when we receive the salvation that we owe to the Saviour, according to the charism of each one of us. We find it hard work living in this unity.

Sister Maria Celeste points out a close link between the praise of God and the desire to see Him praised, and to see Him established as the Saviour. And in our prayers this unity must be found too. Your prayer is an apostolate, not for you or for God, but for salvation, to permit God to be the Saviour of us all. And this logic is also found in your Constitutions, in the first few numbers.

For all this to happen, beginning with sentence 18, Sister Maria Celeste points out how the fire of the Spirit renders us free of every preoccupation:

“F. 18. And then we see how, with no regard to her own interests, such a soul becomes detached and uninterested in her own self, seeking the good of others, to have company with love; she willingly leaves the happiness that she would otherwise enjoy in the corner of her heart, the repose of her senses and the peace of the solitude that she experiences; for the salvation of one soul alone she would die a thousand deaths; she hastens with great affection to the needs of her neighbour, be they spiritual or temporal, becoming everything to everyone, consoling the afflicted, serving them in their infirmity, helping and pitying the weak, teaching the ignorant the way of salvation and drawing sinners to penance”.

This is what your first Rule says, about being free of yourselves, so as to be only for the glory of God and the salvation of others. Sister Maria Celeste says that this liberty is in regard to all this conditioning that can happen around her, and she does not let herself be conditioned by what is happening around her:

“G. 21. In all this she pays no regard to the human senses, nor to created forms, because that fire which both burns her and illumines her, makes her see, with the light of truth, the separation and difference that there is between the created and the uncreated, and between the finite and the infinite. 22. And she passes with a most rapid course through all this, in that light that burns with an infinite power. 23. And very many times it happens that such a soul goes as if outside herself, and is both detached and free and liberated from her own self”.

There is this total availability to the Spirit, by whom the line of reasoning that finds everything that can be conditioned, is thrown out. And this sense of liberty returns at the end of this Grade in regard to the things which happen around her:

“O. 38. And yet in this state rarely or ever is a soul disturbed by any kind of unpleasant event that might befall her, because she experiences substantially, by experience, what she believes by faith, that is, that in everything that happens, her Lord God loves her with the same infinite love”.

It is the line of reasoning that St. Paul uses at the end of Chapter 8 of his Letter to the Romans: neither death nor life can ever separate us from the love of Christ (see 8:38). It is this liberty which must indicate our journey, if we wish to be truly faithful to the Spirit.

But let us note how many times we let ourselves be conditioned by what others say to us or do in order to obtain the consensus of others. There are politicians who are not interested in whether they are saying good or evil, but are only interested in obtaining a consensus. Then there is no longer good or evil, but only what gives us a consensus with others. If we act like this, we can no longer follow the spirit. We must not let ourselves be conditioned by consensus or applause. It is clear that I must always ask myself if my conduct, or my words, are said just to be shared with others, and be the truth for them as well. I shall always be in contact with others, but I must follow the Spirit, by whom I am not conditioned in my actions for others.

The relationship between this liberty and the common good is a relationship that needs to be built, but it remains a fundamental one for us, as I follow the Spirit. But remember that the Spirit, the truth of the Spirit, is that you are charity to others. Understand the discourse that St. Paul gives us in Chapter 10 of the 1st Letter to the Corinthians, when he mentions the expression that the Corinthians used: *everything is licit*", everything is good to do, but St. Paul adds: *"but not everything edifies"* (symferô). This brings everything together. And then he adds (v. 23) that everything is lawful, but not everything "makes the house", i.e., edifies. The conclusion is that following the Spirit is what brings us to choose, not what is individual, but what builds together, but not through a conditioning. I am free, however I choose what allows us to journey together.

The other effect of this presence of the fire within us is the manner in which we courageously take up whatever the tasks are that we have before us. We feel ourselves strong, strong enough to carry others along with us. Sister Maria Celeste speaks very well of this capacity of carrying or bringing others along with us.

"J. 28. Here are born in the soul certain desires that devour her, as we might say, about the salvation and good of souls; nor does she care about fatigue or trouble in achieving it. 29. And ordinarily the soul, to whom the Lord has granted this grace, brings many souls along with her to the eternal life and the state of perfection; nor does such a soul neglect any means or way by which her God may be loved by all; in fact, she would like to burn all hearts with this holy love. 30. Here the natural rivalries cease that are found in the imperfection of mankind, because these souls delight in the good of others as if in their own good".

And then another effect that Sister Maria Celeste points out is that simple and constant "yes" to the divine will. The soul is *"so firmly in the divine will, that through this union all her works become perfect through charity, since her own will is fastened firmly in the divine will and with a marvellous accord, the will of her God seems one with her own"*. (37).

The will of her God seems one with her own. And here I find almost the words of St. Alphonsus. The perfection of charity consists, not in conformity, but in uniformity with the will of God, because we want what God wants. We do not adapt ourselves to what God wants, but with the will of God we are a single thing. From this line of reasoning I would like you to take away with you at least three essential perspectives. The first one is that we must let the Spirit communicate His ardour to us, and not place impediments to it, and let Him free to transform us with His fire. The second one is for the Spirit to give us a hands-on

experience that our truth is love, in such a manner that we do not do works of love or simply love, but that we are love, so much so that when we love, we are our selves. And the third suggestion is about the liberty of love that the Spirit imprints in us. It is not an arbitrary and capricious liberty, but the liberty that is revealed as the requirement to give ourselves in such a way that we are in harmony with St. Paul when he reminds us that liberty for us is a vocation, but it becomes real when we become servants. This completes this Grade, which even if it is a little repetitive, is a very beautiful one.

