

With Mary To Jesus – Testimony of Fr Dr Michael Johannes Marmann

A KEY EXPERIENCE

To report on a deep and far-reaching experience means for me to talk about something that God, the God of our lives and our history, brought about. At least, that is how I understand what I am passing on and testifying to, and how I want it to be understood. In the meantime I am even convinced that I was not given this experience only for myself as part of my biography; I have to pass it on. It has to do with Mary (and her action), but as a consequence it actually has to do with Christ, as anyone can soon discover.

I was a 23-year-old student of theology in the early 1960s; I was open for all that was new in the times and in the academic world, for what happened among my contemporaries and like-minded people, especially if it was unconventional or “alternative”. So I was a more or less normal seminarian: modern, but (naturally) not post-modern. It was about two years before my ordination to the priesthood, which was a long time according to my thinking at that time. It gave me time to experiment not only, but also with regard to my calling. Despite (or because of) having completed my official studies at the University of Bonn, I was trying to find out how to shape my life. Besides this, despite all my openness for secular values, I was sure of my faith in principle and determined to stand up for it.

Like many of my fellow students I shared the attitude of a number of – also Catholic – intellectuals and academics to conservative and traditional elements: Either I ignored them or rejected them and protested against them; at any rate I considered them irrelevant. Devotion to Mary was part of it. As I put it at that time, I would rather turn to some unknown saint than to this woman. ...

I led a fairly wild, if not to say restless, life in the seminary shortly before 1968 – inwardly and outwardly. One day, shortly before midnight, I returned from an (unauthorised) visit through the centre of Cologne. My room was only a few metres from the entrance to the gallery of the house chapel, and I felt drawn to say a brief prayer in this darkened church. It was quiet and dark except for two small flames that lit up the surrounding darkness. There was one light near the tabernacle: Real Presence of the Lord in the Sacrament of the Eucharist, and the other before a statue of Mary, honoured as the “Seat of Wisdom”. While I paused there in prayer, reflecting on the day with all its truck and trying to recollect myself as I examined my conscience, I looked at the dimly lit statue of Mary. I suddenly asked myself a strange question: Would I be able to use the familiar “You” to Mary?¹ Despite singing and praying Marian hymns, despite the Rosary and pilgrimages to Marian places of grace, and despite celebrating her feast, this was obviously a genuine question for me! I can still remember clearly how this

¹ In German, as in many other languages, a distinction is made between the more formal and familiar form of address.

simple question not only stimulated, but also excited me. How far I was from the Mother of the Lord, from a vital relationship with her!

Although I cannot recall giving a definite answer, it was obvious to me: Why not? I don't know how long I spent on this nocturnal meditation; I was hardly conscious of the importance of this process. I can only recall one thing clearly, as though it was inevitable: I turned to the other light near the tabernacle. Suddenly Christ was tangibly there – very personally, vitally. He cast a spell over me and filled me as though there was nothing else that was important or could be significant for my life. In a matter of seconds, at that moment, I realised that until then I had not had a genuine, deeper and inspired contact with Jesus! I had always had a powerful interest in God's Word, in exegesis, also the form and celebration of the Eucharist. It was not just an interest, it awakened my creativity and joyful commitment: It must always have a certain style, and I considered some Bible passages successful literary works. ... Yet suddenly, as though by a miracle, everything was different. In the Eucharist I really meet Jesus "who loved me and gave himself up for me" (Gal 2,20), and in the Scriptures he talks personally to me: "The Way, the Truth and the Life" (Jn 14,6).

An exemplary process that I had been allowed to experience without my willing or meriting it: Through Mary to Jesus. From that moment my (religious) life changed completely – from Christianity as an idea to faith, from thinking to life. When I reflect on it now, much becomes clear; what is shocking, however, is that I had considered my years of working within the Church and the business of studying theology the normal life of a Christian. ...

Only later did I discover the far-reaching consequences of this key experience that determined the path of my future calling. After all, I was a sincere candidate for the (Catholic) priesthood, who was open for higher values and believed in Christ, and despite a number of detours and irregularities had remained on the right path. But my thinking and life was wrong! It was not my fault! It was obvious, in order to emphasise only this point, which is only the tip of the iceberg, I was unable to think of Jesus and Mary together. Mary was, so to say, non-existent, and (at least for me personally) so was my relationship to Jesus – it wasn't alive, it did not touch my soul. Of course I knew about the Virgin of Nazareth (i.e. what is written in the Bible), but I was not conscious of it, or it was separate, that is, it was unconnected with Christ, and both were information in my mind without reaching my heart. Apparently I had to discover this in this sensitive and gentle way. My heart, that seemed to want to use the familiar "You", had been "switched off". Only when it was "switched on" was I able to turn completely to Jesus and take him in.

Years later I met the founder of the Schoenstatt Movement, Fr Joseph Kentenich, in the USA, where he had been sent into exile by Church authorities because they had not understood his charismatic mission. He was kept there strictly separated from the work he had founded. When I told him about the start of my relationship to Mary, he answered, "If you love the Blessed Mother, we are friends". In the course of decades spent getting to know his objectives, I understood the significance and scope of my first experience with Mary ever more clearly: that I had been led from an unsound and unhealthy way of thinking, which he called "separatistic" or "mechanistic", to an holistic

way of thinking that is able to see and think of together what is meant to be together. He called this "organic thinking, living and loving."

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