

The Marian Option – On the “fiat” of Our Lady and the Future of the Church

1. Joseph Ratzinger, Mary and the Church

In his small Mariological treatise "The Daughter of Zion"¹, Joseph Ratzinger admitted to a change of mind regarding the interpretation of the Wisdom texts in the Old Testament. For years he had been of the opinion, together with the liturgical movement, that these texts could only be understood Christologically. Now, he said, it has become increasingly clear to him - certainly under the influence of Hans Urs von Balthasar - "that it actually misjudges what is most characteristic in those Wisdom texts." It is true that Christology has taken up essential elements of the Wisdom literature, he said. On the other hand, not everything can be integrated into Christology. Firstly, we note that "wisdom" is feminine in both Greek and Hebrew, which in the linguistic consciousness of antiquity was "not an empty grammatical phenomenon." In addition, as Ratzinger explains, "‘Sophia’, a feminine noun, stands on that side of reality, which is represented by the woman, by what is purely and simply feminine. It signifies the answer which emerges from the divine call of creation and election. It expresses precisely this: that there is a pure answer and that God’s love finds its irrevocable dwelling place within it."²

In his text called "The Place of Marian Doctrine and Piety in Faith and Theology as a Whole"³ Ratzinger speaks of the fact that in Mary the Church is personalized, meaning that in reference to Mary, the Church could be seen as a person and not first as a structure. Secondly, "Marian" means at the same time "incarnational," that is, in Mary there is a unity between the concrete bodily, spiritual, and faith life of a person and his or her relationship with God. Furthermore, in Mary the Church stands in relative independence as creation in relation to the Creator. In Mary, the unity and difference of the Body of Christ and the Bride of God become concretely visible. And because Mary is the archetype of the Church, these attributes can also be applied to the Church as a whole: The Church is first feminine. She is at the same time the personal body of Christ and the bride of Christ. The Church is the one who responds to the coming of the Word. In the church, God's word is sacramentally incarnated ever new.

Such strong attributes, which are ascribed to Mary as the "church at the source"⁴, leave us wondering. Why then does Mariology consistently play a subordinate role in the post-conciliar ecclesiologies? Why does Joseph Ratzinger himself say that the "victory of ecclesio-centric Mariology" at the Council even led to a "collapse of Mariology altogether?"⁵ Peculiarly, however, this also seems to apply to the two large volumes of Joseph Ratzinger's collected writings on ecclesiology itself.⁶ In these texts, too, Mariology is only marginally discussed. Indeed, Ratzinger's essential Mariological texts are collected in the anthology on "Creation - Anthropology - Mariology"⁷ and not in the volumes on ecclesiology. This may have been a rational decision of the editors in respect to the size of the volumes, but it is also

¹ Einsiedeln ²1977

² Ebd., 24 (= JGRS 8, 410)

³ JGRS 8, 462-476

⁴ So der Titel eines gemeinsamen Buches von J. Ratzinger und H.U. v. Balthasar, erstmals Freiburg 1980.

⁵ JGRS 5, 466

⁶ Vgl. JGRS 8/1 und 8/2.

⁷ = JGRS 5

characteristic of post-conciliar ecclesiology in the German-speaking world: Mariology plays a very subordinate role, if it is considered at all. It is also largely left out of the academic theological discourse - and is reduced, at least in the German-speaking world, predominantly to private forms of devotion in the people of God. Joseph Ratzinger, in his own theological reflections and texts on Mariology, has been working to overcome this forgetfulness of Mary for a long time.

In the following, I would like to show how, from the unfolding of a personalistic view of ontology, we can - and, in my view, we must - understand Mary as our mother and the mother of the Church. Not only in the sense of subjective piety, but also in the objective sense of an ontological "a priori". I also hope to show why this can be important especially in respect to the importance of the concept of freedom in our western cultures. I will do this with the provision of some thought "tools" from an ontology of love and gift in connection with dialogical personalism – both of which were also important for Joseph Ratzinger.

2. Being as Love

We believe that everything created comes from God's gratuitous love or unintentional love. The world exists only because God loves - and not because he needs the world. Faith also explains the continuity of the world in time and history with God's gratuitous love: He holds it in being.

Man is the creature towards whom the whole creation is designed. In man the unfolding of creation comes to its final form: Man can recognize God and he can recognize himself in God and can therefore from his own self live and offer the praise of God. But, as we see everywhere and also within us, man has inwardly removed himself from his source of life. He has become an ego-centered being in need of redemption and consecrated to death, who finds it difficult to realize God's presence in the world. In the imagery of Scripture, this is man who has left paradise. Paradise is the realm of intact relationships of human beings with God, with each other, with themselves and with their fellow creatures. All of creation is being held in existence by the gratuitous and attentive love of the Father.

To illustrate this, let us imagine two scenarios: Imagine that you are a small child in a garden at the home of your parents, who love you, who take care of you, and who make sure that nothing happens to you. Even though you are outside in the garden, you know inside your heart that mom and dad are there in the adjacent house. You do not see the parents right now, but it is their garden. They are cultivating it - and you, as their child, are allowed to play there. The loving presence of mom and dad permeates the garden. You therefore also play in all freedom, joy, and excitement of discovery - surrounded by the protective love of your parents. And in the watchful attention of everything you experience and learn there.

And now imagine the same garden, also the same house. But your parents have been gone for a long time now. *Someone* has put you in the garden so that you can stay there. It's the same environment, but your childlike, emotional situation is completely different. You are uncertain. You may be afraid. You don't know what to do with yourself. You hope to get out soon. The reality you are in is the same materially and externally, but from your interior perspective, from your view of this world, it is completely different. You are on guard, you are

turned in on yourself, you are afraid. The world now seems threatening. You don't experience the same creative and playful freedom that you did in the Garden. Rather, at worst, you simply feel you must survive. You lack people who provide secure and healthy attachment. You are an orphan in this world. The garden is no longer a paradise.

From this image we can come to understand that the kingdom of God is a kingdom of freedom, of love and of God's devotion to his children. God's love permeates everything and gives all reality the splendor of his presence. People who know themselves to be his children can recognize this splendor in the world and in their fellow creatures. The kingdom darkens and becomes threatening when the presence of God is no longer believed and experienced. The world becomes a battlefield of survival in opposition, in self-centeredness, in greed for power and recognition, for pleasure and wealth. And the consequence is: if God is no longer believed to be present, the longed-for happiness, the longed-for peace of heart must be found exclusively in this world - and exclusively with means from this limited and finite world. Nevertheless, we still feel - even in the fallen state - that the longed-for happiness must have something to do with love. This is because the deepest reason for the world's existence remains even when people have fallen, taking the world with them. The world is also doomed, says Paul (cf. Rom 8:19-20). And yet the deepest reason for the existence of the world remains gratuitous love. And the searching and questioning human being experiences - often desperately - that he himself is hardly capable of this love.

3. Redemption

God answers this desperate situation of man by offering his covenant repeatedly. He makes Himself tangible to individuals and to a people, gives them the experience that He is - in spite of everything - the "I-am-who-am" God who liberates, who is present through history, who establishes new identity, who proves to be the faithful one and therefore also expects faithfulness and love from His people and the keeping of the commandments He gives them. The Tent of Revelation in the desert and the Temple in Jerusalem are places of paradise, places of return towards the encounter with the living God. Israel receives from these places wisdom from and about its God, reconciliation with its God, blessings from its God. When the relationship with God is in the right order, in an order that consists above all in the right cult of worship and in right moral action, then the blessings flow, then God gives protection and fruitfulness for his people.

At the same time, however, the texts of the Old Covenant tell the story of how the people repeatedly fall away from God and his covenant - and how, as a result, catastrophes befall the people. Therefore, Israel waits, with its prophets, for the Messiah, who is foretold to defeat the enemies of Israel, to unite the people and to restore right worship. And with this hope a new covenant is announced, which God wants to make with the people - and which is written in the hearts of the people. And yet - one main problem remains throughout the history of the people of God: Its worship and its observance of the Mosaic law often and largely remain external to the people, failing to reach and change their hearts. And so Scripture continues to ask: Where are the upright Jews, who as a "holy remnant" really loves God with all their heart above all else - and their neighbor as themselves?

God comes as a gift in the unity of fullness and nothingness

So, God himself chooses to come into the world - and he cannot do it otherwise than as truth and as love. That means: He needs a place of arrival that opens itself to him in such a profoundly responding way that he can come as himself. And if we now ask ourselves how he comes as himself, then the Christian answer is found in the figure of the Redeemer He is characterized through and through by kenotic love, through which God reveals himself at the same time as the true and the glorious. The initial earthly form of this manifesting love will be a child, a baby, which at its birth cannot yet speak a word - and which at the same time we confess and celebrate on the feast of this birth as the Eternal Word of God, the eternal Logos. The final expression of this love on earth is the crucified love. It is the naked, tortured, disfigured, killed Jesus. Sacrificial love, up to the absolute humiliation on the cross. And St. John nevertheless presents to us this ugly figure of humiliation as exaltation, which is at the same time the expression of the beauty, the glory of God's love. Likewise, in view of the Word, of the eternal Logos, who is Christ in person: At the moment when he falls silent dying on the cross, he says with his whole life all that he has to say. The utmost word of love expresses itself by dying and saying nothing more.

That it is to say, we encounter here an expression of love in which poverty is not separated from richness. Its lowliness, its emptiness is not distinguished from its greatness; its fullness is not distinguished from its nothingness. Rather, we must say that this extreme expression of poverty is precisely the richness of love; the ugliness of the cross is the glory of love. Its most creative power shows itself as utmost powerlessness. We can even say: His dying is identical with his giving of new life.

Now we can ask ourselves: How and where does this insight affect myself, my life, my faith? The answer is: The Holy Mass. In Mass, you are invited to give a response to the offer of God's love in this incomprehensible unity of fullness and nothingness. The Eucharistic Jesus gives himself to you in the form of absolute poverty: a small piece of bread, which would not be able to even begin to satisfy bodily hunger, is at the same time the bread of life; the bread that gives eternal life. In this piece of seeming nothingness, the One in whom all the wealth of the universe was created gives Himself to you. That means, whenever we celebrate the source and summit of all Christian life, we are called to respond this gift of God. For God gives himself to us in Christ as a gift.

And here we are immediately confronted with a big problem: we are sinners! And the state of our being a sinner is in some way defined by the fact that we are unable to respond to this gift in the appropriately. That is, in such a way that this gift can become effective in us, that it can work in us. Being a sinner means that in our thoughts and actions we cannot help but separate power and powerlessness, wealth and poverty, fullness and nothingness of love. We want to love and enjoy the other - without suffering personally and with others. We seek the possession of fullness without the poverty of receiving. We want to enjoy the other without making ourselves vulnerable. We carefully measure our openness and commitment so that our inflated ego is not compromised or unsettled. We want to receive gifts without being made poor and empty in return. And anyone who has ever thought more deeply about what it means to receive a gift also knows that there is a range of possible reactions - between two extremes.

Imagine that you are invited to receive something very, very precious as a gift. At one end of the scale of your heart is greed: you recognize the great thing and immediately want to seize it, to incorporate it, to add it to your possessions, to your wealth. You may even think you deserve it. Think of the character of Gollum in the film version of Tolkien's "Lord of the Rings," as he snatches the ring of power, shouting with wide-open eyes, "My precious!" We can each probably recognize this sort of greed in ourselves when we are confronted with a great gift. The problem is, of course, that greed detaches the gift from its source, from the giver. The gift is then seen as an independent object, and we fail to see the giver behind the gift. The greedy person remains the master of the situation in the snatching of the gift. He makes of the gift a mere object, which he assimilates. But the gift does not change the person of greed, on the contrary. From here, greed only grows, and the person simply wants more and more.

The opposite reaction to greed when receiving a gift, is rejection. In rejection, the value of the gift is perhaps recognized, but at the same time the intended receiver realizes that in receiving the gift, they make themselves in some way dependent on the giver. The sinner can only really see the nature of giving to be an economic barter: "Do, ut des". I give so that you give me something in return. Or: I receive something great - and the giver consequently expects something great from me. Therefore, rejection shouts: "I can't possibly accept this!" Or "This is way too much for me!" And the intended recipient pretends to be humble and unworthy. In fact, however, they suspect, "If I really let this gift get to me, and with the gift possibly also the giver, then I could no longer remain myself." Therefore, their gesture is ultimately false humility, which does not want to and cannot engage with the giver.

Now, somewhere between these two extremes we find ourselves, as sinners, all of us, when we are exposed to the offer of God's gift. And between these two extremes there is also in addition the possibility of the banalization of the gift through unbelief: If something appears as small as a tiny piece of bread, then it cannot possibly be that great and maybe it doesn't even come from God.

How then, we ask ourselves, can God come into the world as the gift of love, in the incomprehensible unity of fullness and nothingness - when the world is made up of sinners, who are characterized precisely by their inability to accept this gift in such a way that God becomes truly present in them? And without the gift being either greedily distorted or rejected or trivialized in unbelief in the process? The answer that God gives in salvation history: He creates in Mary a responder, a recipient of the gift, who is originally so holy that she can say a yes, a "fiat" with her whole existence, which is so authentic that God can actually come to the world in her and through her. And then, through her Son and with her at his side, a path can begin on which he gathers the people as a new family of God, enables them increasingly to give him their own, existential "yes"- and thus leads them home, into the kingdom of the Father. Mary is thus in an original, I will also say and explain it better in a moment, in an ontological sense "Church in origin". She is the Church as a concrete person and thus she "personalizes" Church in the words of Joseph Ratzinger. She is the most concrete place of the Incarnation - and thus in the deepest possible sense the realization of the biblical image of the "dwelling of God among men" (Rev 21:3). Moreover, she is at once the concrete image-giver of the human body of Christ - and through her "fiat" at the same time the mother of the mystical body of Christ. And finally, she is free counterpart to God as daughter of the Father, bride of the Spirit and mother of the Son of God. And when Jesus in the Upper Room and on Golgotha accomplishes and completes the new covenant with those

given to him by his Father, then it was already accomplished in advance in her as the first redeemed. In her, the "new creation" (Gal 6:15) is already present before we are all invited to participate in it as well - through a "new birth" (cf. 1 Pet 1:23 and Jn 3:3). In this sense, she embodies the liberated freedom that is ahead of us all - and that shows us to what we are called.

Perhaps some of you are now asking: Why doesn't God just work this original salvation in all of us? Why does only this young girl from Palestine get this privilege of being freed from sin - and not all of us? If God wants to redeem everyone, why only Mary? First, it must be said: this privilege comes at a cost that is almost incomprehensible. "A sword will pass through your soul," prophesies the elderly Simeon in Luke's Gospel (Lc 2,35). If she is indeed free from sin according to our faith, she has the most loving heart any creature has ever had after the Fall. She has a heart first and foremost for her son Jesus. Imagine, therefore, her loving and faithful accompaniment through his life and suffering - until she finally stands under the cross of the agonizingly suffering and crucified one. And here one can ask oneself the frightful question: What was her experience on Good Friday and Holy Saturday? What death did she die in her soul - she, the lover par excellence? And did she still believe on Holy Saturday, amid the deepest pain? In any case, it is true: A sword has gone through her soul! She is in this way, the preeminent and model answer to the question of the unity of poverty and richness, of fullness and nothingness. Her love is so rich that she can let herself be so terribly wounded in union with her son.

A second aspect: in salvation history, God always begins with individuals as covenant partners, who then attain significance for the many: In the election of Noah for his family, in Abraham, Isaac and Jacob for tribe of people, in Moses for a nation of tribes in the promised land, in David for a royal kingdom. In Jesus, God himself comes to his people - and he comes through a woman from his people. In his action toward her and in her response to him, final reconciliation takes place between God and his renewed creation. In Colossians we read about Jesus being the "firstborn of all creation." In view of his mother, we may also read this passage in the sense that he is at the same time the firstborn of the very creation which was renewed through him; so that the many redeemed through Christ, to whom he is a brother as the firstborn (cf. Rom 8:29), may also be born anew from this union.

4. A New Birth

Now I would like to explain how this can be understood and how it can be experienced. When I said earlier that the Scriptures tell of God's selection of individuals who then become significant to the many, we also speak of "corporate personalities" in this context. Abraham is also "father of the multitude" and is the most prominent example in the Old Covenant of a person from whom initially "according to the flesh" countless descendants emerge. They refer to their bodily descent to him - as an essential characteristic of their belonging to a community which then sees itself as a people as the bearer of God's promise. Paul then reinterprets the fatherhood of Abraham: because of his faith, he is the promise-bearer and "father of faith": "So then, those who are of faith are blessed along with Abraham, the man of faith." (Gal 3:9). New birth, or inclusion in the family of God, no longer takes place "according to the flesh" (cf. Rom 9:5), but by faith, for all who "receive" Jesus (Jn 1,12). According to the Gospel of John, these are then all those "who were born, not of blood nor of the will of the

flesh nor of the will of man, but of God." (John 1:13). The first and, therefore, the most original of these recipients is Mary. Her "fiat" occurs not from consent to a bodily union, but from faith. In this sense, we also venerate her as the "Mother of our faith".⁸

As a religious and member of the Salesians of Don Bosco, I would like to clarify for you how such maternity can actually also be understood in a personal-ontological sense. To this end, I will start with spiritual community experiences. The great founding figures of our catholic orders each have their own mission, a charism. Their charismatic nature grows out of the intensity of their consent to their vocation by God. When we read their biographies or texts, we see how they responded, "with all their heart, soul and strength" to God's call, how they gave their "fiat" and lived out their whole life as a "fiat". And obviously, through their life with God, such founding figures acquire such an inner breadth and depth and a potent radiance that other people are drawn close to them. The example of my religious father Don Bosco may illustrate this: In his first foundation in Torino, he had such a formative effect that the many young people who came to his oratory naturally went with the simple intention to go "to Don Bosco". In other words, they did not go to the organization or program created for them in the district of Valdocco, they went rather to a place marked and atmospherically permeated by Don Bosco's presence, by his love and fatherliness – even when he was not there. He was able to give everyone the experience that he really meant well with them - and that therefore God also meant well with them. They felt that Don Bosco lived from of a deep connection to Christ. This experience led quite a few of them to want to place their lives at the service of Don Bosco's mission as well. One could say that the great "fiat" that Don Bosco said and lived has now also awakened in them their own "fiat". Through Don Bosco's ministry, they became aware of the call of God in their own lives. And in this way, they were able to build their own lives on the same foundation on which Don Bosco's "fiat" had become transparent for them.

The miraculous action of grace of such a great mission as that of Don Bosco has several consequences. Firstly, people learn to live "in the spirit of Don Bosco". However, spiritual experience teaches that such a life does not simply cause a person to become a kind of copy of Don Bosco, but rather he becomes more deeply himself - and thus also quite distinct from the founding figure. Nevertheless, brothers of the community feel: we are all quite different, but we live from the same spirit. It is the Holy Spirit, but in Don Bosco's life it has produced a particular character, a particular style of life, and a variety of different qualities in people. Salesians recognize each other - and the miraculous thing is just this: They recognize each other even through diverse cultures and across different generations. Sometimes, when I receive letters or mails from confreres abroad, especially from southern European countries, they end their lines with "in Don Bosco, your confrere so-and-so" - that is, in an analogous way to how many of us write: "In Christ, your so-and-so". I am interested here in this little word "in" - and I would interpret it this way: Don Bosco's wide heart and impact creates an atmosphere of community "in" which one can enter, or "in" which one is a person who belongs. Similarly, we speak of what happens "in" our family or "in" our friendship. Successful relationships live in and from a specific spirit that is formative and sustaining, forming, and changing hearts. So we live in and from the mission and the great heart of Don Bosco and his "fiat". And to the extent that I open myself to it again, I also make it possible for this "in-experience" to continue through my work and to be experienced anew by others.

⁸ Papst Franziskus, Enzyklika *Lumen fidei* 60

I share this with you with Mary in mind - with several considerations. First of all, I can say that my own attempt to say "fiat" to my vocation as a Salesian is, in a certain way, actually "in" the "fiat" that I have experienced through my encounters with other faithful people, especially with Salesians - through their wideness of heart and faith, through their relationship with Jesus and through their own being marked by Don Bosco. In fact, it can be said that each one of us Salesians is "in" Don Bosco's fiat, in his mission, in his generous response to Jesus' call. Don Bosco is, in this sense, a co-witness of my vocation by God - and therefore a father - and father of our Order. Other people, especially other Salesians, are also fatherly co-witnesses of my vocation to me. But we are probably largely in agreement that Don Bosco is the original witness, the father, for this Salesian expression of Christianity. In this sense, St. Paul can write to the Corinthians: "For though you have countless guides in Christ, you would not have many fathers. For in Christ Jesus, I have become your father through the gospel." (1 Cor 4:15) For my Salesian life, the deepest, most far-reaching and penetrating "fiat" came from Don Bosco; the radicality of his response to God's call, with his lifestyle and mission, especially to young people, made his generative power pervasive in this way - through time and space for multitudes.

But we can also see from this interpretation: a particular expression of the faith, a specific mission given by God emerges from one or more people – and this is true for each and every one of us. We say rather superficially: "We pass on the faith". But in fact, to learn the faith and a specific expression of faith is to learn it through another, a process of formation and conception that makes us more and more new people, newly born. Of course, in each case we maintain and deepen also with our own ability, desire, and will to give a response.

From here we go further: if one "fiat" comes from another "fiat", then we can ask ourselves: is there an original "fiat", an original "yes" to God, from which all other vocations and missions in the Church come? And the answer must consequently be yes, it is the "fiat" of Mary. Every Christian who gives with their lives an authentic response to the living, crucified and risen Word of God, gives it also from this original "fiat" that Mary said and lived with her whole life. And because - as we believe - she is assumed into heaven; she says it anew with all those who believe in Jesus. She is therefore, in a certain sense, the Church or the Mother of all those who are Church. From her "fiat" every other "fiat" is ultimately born. And therefore, it is not a strange fact that all great founders of religious orders were and are also great devotees of the Mother of God. From her, new birth takes place, from her who stands under the cross, at the moment when Jesus makes his gift of life and addresses her as "woman". Jesus' self-giving Love gives itself to those whose "fiat" remains open to him even under the cross. And so, from this fruitfulness of the cross and its acceptance through the "woman", new family relationships are born. The "disciple whom Jesus loved" is "born again", now becomes her son: "Woman, behold your son" - "Behold your mother", as St. John quotes Jesus (Jn 19:26f).

5. The Social Dimension of Church

I would like to ask you again to use your imagination. This time, imagine that you are a father or mother and have a younger child who goes out of the house to play with other children in other families. You would almost certainly prefer it if you knew that your child was playing in another home where peace reigns, with a family permeated with love; where the parents

treat the children lovingly and teach their children to do the same. And conversely, you would not like the child to play in a troubled home dominated by suspicion, where he/she learns how to trick others, where there may be irascibility and violence, where the child learns attitudes and language that could influence him/her in a bad way. There the child could be led into an inner disposition that makes him less open to the good, the true and the beautiful - and that makes him more susceptible to seduction to evil, to lying, to quick pleasure at the expense of other people or things. Why would the child be easily influenced to do this? Because it likes to play with others, because it likes to be accepted, because it has an open heart, and because it then learns that the other children, as if by themselves, apparently find the bad behaviors good. From this small example we can see: There are communities in which a good spirit prevails and those in which a bad spirit dominates. When we speak of spirit in this sense, we are always talking about a relational reality, an atmosphere between people, which, however, naturally has its origin in individual people and in the way in which people engage with each other and thus with the spirit of the other. In this way, people also generate with each other a common spirit, a common atmosphere; the whole of such a community is, atmospherically speaking, more than the sum of its parts. And so, in all forms of human community in this world, a common spirit is generated, and everywhere it exists as "mixed atmospheres"; atmospheres characterized by different attitudes, feelings and motives. We Salesians of Don Bosco strive to live a "Salesian spirit" in our homes for the young people and for each other. And we hope that this spirit, then, is not only our own, but that through us the Spirit of God collaborates in creating a spiritual, Salesian atmosphere for many.

But the problem is: Satan is also pure spirit and disguises himself, according to the apostle Paul, as an angel of light. This means that very often a community corrupted by the evil spirit appears at first as good, as attractive, as luminous. One lets oneself be taken in, one allows oneself - as we say - to be captivated by the pervading spirit. And in the bad case, one becomes a prisoner in the spell of a corrupted community.

Now, if there has been - spiritually speaking - only one creature who was so holy that she was permeated by God's presence through and through, bodily, mentally and spiritually, then it is Mary. In her and through her, the Spirit opened the atmospheric space for the Holy Family, which was also the Spirit of Jesus. In her, Jesus came to Himself as a child - and, as Scripture says - "increased in wisdom" (Lk 2:51) and "God's grace rested on Him" (Lk 2:40). He Himself was the God-Man, "filled with the Holy Spirit" (Lk 4:1) and she was the Bride of the Spirit Himself, who "overshadowed by the Holy Spirit" (Lk 1:35) did not offer any resistance to the arrival of God, neither bodily, nor in soul, nor spirit, so that she is called God-Bearer, Theotokos. But that means, that the atmosphere "between" them, that is, what Martin Buber calls "the in-between", is already the dawn of the Kingdom of God. Her radical "fiat" to all that she experiences with Jesus, carried through to the end, makes his abiding presence in her heart and vice versa possible. From the deep togetherness of the two, an in-between, a spiritual atmosphere arises, which is already in this time the presence of the Kingdom of God. In her, in him and in the togetherness of the two, their union, the Kingdom of God is concretely present. And the "disciple whom Jesus loved" (Jn 19:26), from his position under the cross, is brought into the "in-between" of the two. He finds himself in the "new family" - and is "baptized" from it and "born anew" in it. The cross is here the place where also the "fiat" of the mother has its final test. Even now Mary remains and offers still her fiat, saying "let it be done unto me according to your word" with her whole existence, in which she also suffers the torture of the crucified. And He Himself, the Word Himself, the Redeemer on the

cross, says everything at the same moment with His gift of love; His voluntary surrender to death is His creative, loving, ultimate promise to those given to Him, a promise that He will be with them, whatever the world will do to Him and to them- in the power of the Spirit. "It is finished" (Jn 19:30). In Mary, amidst the extreme suffering, the bond with Him remained alive. Their bond, their union, the spirit between them is forever inseparable. She is thus already completely participating in the Trinitarian exchange of love. Faith also confirms her being brought to "completion" or "perfected" by the conviction that she has been taken up to heaven with body and soul.

If from this union under the cross the one is "born anew" whom "Jesus loved", then this applies to the disciple, as it were, from his interior outwards. It is a process of birth by faith. He has remained by Jesus in faith all the way to the cross and is therefore taken into the relationship of Son and Mother, who here becomes the Mother of the Church. Faith will permeate his whole life. He is the son of the Mother, brother of the Lord and child of the Father. He will be ready to testify with his whole life to who and what the new life is in him. Joseph Ratzinger had said about Mary that through her the Church is personalized, which I hope I have demonstrated. But the Marian, Ratzinger said, also stands for "the incarnational." We could say, according to what has been said so far: whoever enters with faith into the "in-between" and allows himself to be seized and touched by it, whoever believes that "in" Mary he learns to speak his own "fiat", will learn to do so more and more with his whole life. In such an answering person the eternal Logos becomes less of a mere "conceptus", a mere concept or thought, but a living "conceptio", a conception in flesh and blood. He becomes more deeply himself and at the same time more deeply mother, brother, sister of the firstborn himself (cf. Mk 3:35). He himself becomes one who brings Christ to the world. And thirdly, says Joseph Ratzinger, the Marian represents the autonomy of creation in relation to the Creator. For in Mary, creation gives an entirely free yes to its Creator. In her, the Church is not only the body of Christ - in the sense of inseparable unity with him, she is also the bride of Christ - in the sense of a free, individual counterpart. In her, then, it becomes profoundly clear that the Lord with His love wants to radically permeate the Church and, in and through her, all of humanity and all of creation. He wants to give new life to the dying; he wants his life to flow in her veins - and in this respect she is "his body". But it is precisely the mystery of love that makes it clear: being "one in the love of Christ" leads just as deeply into our own individual selfhood, our own individuality. God, the artist, creates us anew by giving us a new birth in his Church out of his love - but artists always create unique pieces out of the same love. Participation with Mary in the love mystery of the Trinity means: becoming one in Christ and precisely in this becoming more deeply myself - as a whole person with body and soul.

This brings us back to the beginning: In Mary the Church is personalized; her presence, her fiat also helps others to let Christ become "flesh and blood" in them. She is "incarnational." And she epitomizes creaturely freedom, the bride standing before the bridegroom. Her "fiat" is made possible by grace - and for this very reason also comes fully from herself, from her freedom before God.

6. What does this mean for us?

There is book popular among Catholics in America by Rod Dreher called "The Benedict Option." In it, the author makes a proposal for how Christians might strengthen each other in

an increasingly secular society. Taking up this expression and following Joseph Ratzinger, I propose what I call "the Marian Option." I think, that we need to learn to believe that Mary is for us a kind of ontological a priory, a fruitful new mother earth, in whom and out of whom we are newly born and learn to speak our own "fiat" to Christ. Here, in her and through her, we find a form of freedom that lives as a "being-in-Christ" that is at the same time a "being-before-Christ". Or in the biblical images: We belong to the mystical Body of Christ and at the same time we are children of the Bride of Christ. We have been "born again .. through the word of God" (1 Pet 1:23) and at the same time we are free, responding counterparts to Christ. He is the Word, and we in Mary give the response. From this we also see what kind of freedom God provides: Mary is the created, new freedom par excellence. In her, Christ lives completely - and precisely in this, she is completely herself in the deepest possible sense. Only in the love that comes from Christ exists this mystery: a love that pushes towards unity and precisely in this unity reveals the differentiation and the individuality of the many.

This mystery, at the same time also reveals some temptations of our church: Conservative Catholic traditionalism is sometimes tempted to demand a uniformity that tends to negate selfhood and plurality - which finally proves unfruitful. Liberal Christianity, on the other hand, sometimes tends to recognize a plurality in which people no longer want to be involved in the obedience of love to Christ - and therefore ultimately tends toward an unfruitful arbitrariness.

But for us, following Joseph Ratzinger, we ought to abide in the truth: In Mary - and I would claim only in her - we learn to speak our "fiat". In Paul there is a variation of this when he can say: "It is no longer I who live, but Christ who lives in me" (Gal 2:20). And in this, according to all that I have tried to present here today, this "no longer I" is not a disappearance or annihilation of Paul's person or personality. Rather, it is only through the presence of the Lord in his life that the newly born Paul comes to a new life - in all the freedom of his person, and in the distinctiveness of his person as body-soul creature, which comes so clearly to light in his writings.

In the final analysis, this means that if we, in our faith, our lives, our dealings with fellow men, become, in Mary, as docile to Christ and as permeated by him as Mary, then we will make possible a Church in which everyone is unconditionally recognized in their dignity and freedom. This yes of recognition must always come first, entirely void of conditions. At the same time, we hope and pray that each person who walks with us in this pilgrimage of life will deeply recognize that they themselves are called to a Marian Fiat, a receptivity and response to God's grace, and thus to become dwelling places of the Most High, Jesus Christ. I am confident that when a person existentially finds an answer which grants him new birth and with it a new identity, then he will also find himself quite naturally asking the resulting questions: How does this affect my life in a concrete way? How does this impact the greater arch of my story? How does it inform my relationship to my self and to my own body? How my relationships with other people, with my family, with creation? Such an answering Christian will also be able to perceive within himself a call to be personally a "Temple of God" (1 Cor 3:17). A temple of the God who is himself gratuitous Love. And to make a personal statement, at least for the German speaking background: Maybe only from such a starting point of view we will in future be able to enter again in a reasonable conversation on those complex and intensely discussed topics of our time on anthropology, like personal identity or sex and gender on the basis of Christian revelation and tradition. Or also, for example, on some of the important questions in the ecumenical dialogue.

The social dimension of the church of the future, especially in liberal, post-Christian societies, will therefore probably often consist of small, Marian communities in which people pray together and practice unconditional love - for each other and for those on the margins. They will learn to grow together into the freedom of God's children, they will learn not to be possessive and not to be manipulative, to serve freely and selflessly. They will respect every person, without exception. They will desire fervently that as many people as possible to encounter and enter into the mystery from which they themselves live: From the presence of Jesus and from the "fiat" of Mary.