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During the beatification process of St. John Paul II the Marian aspect of the Pope's spirituality was brought up many times. As one witness put it beautifully and eloquently, "John Paul II learned to look at the world with the eyes of Mary."

A few months ago during a meeting with priests at the Roman Basilica of Santa Maria Maggiore, Pope Francis commented on this idea contemplating the meaning of the words "looking at the world with the eyes of Mary."

The first thought that arises from this expression leads us to the beginning of Mary's spiritual journey. When the Angel Gabriel visits Mary at her home in Nazareth he calls her "full of grace." These words refer to the fact that this young woman had received God's mercy in her life. She is aware of the gift and sings about it in the *Magnificat*, glorifying God for "the great things that He did for her." The awareness of being loved makes Mary free from any fear and allows her to answer Gabriel, "Behold, I am the handmaid of the Lord, let it be done according to thy word." Nothing makes a man fully free as does the consciousness of being unconditionally loved!

Francis described Mary as a vessel to receive mercy and the spring of God's mercy. These two images, the vessel and the spring, let us immediately understand the essence of freedom taught by Mary: take the gift of God and bring it to others!

This is the dynamics of holiness! The saints were able to receive mercy in a particular historical reality, often marked by suffering, the experience of weakness and limitations. This openness to God's mercy made them people of a new heart.

How can we understand these dynamics of "looking at the world with the eyes of Mary"?

The first thing that Mary teaches us when we look at the world with her eyes is the capacity to recognize the presence of God's grace in our lives, which is the most evident proof of our being beloved!

I think a great example of this logic of divine action is St. John Paul II. He, like all saints, became in this process a vessel of mercy and its spring.

St. John Paul II did not leave us with many personal writings or spiritual journals. Among the few personal notes written, though, one is of particular importance. Right after the election to the Holy See, the newly elected Pope surprised the world by visiting his friend Fr. Deskur, who was suffering from cerebral haemorrhage during the days of the conclave. After this visit John Paul II mentioned that when Paul VI appointed him as Cardinal, his dear friend, Fr. Jaworski, was severely injured in an accident, losing a hand. Now, the illness of Fr. Deskur was accompanying his election to Peter's chair. The Pope summed up his reflections, writing down: "Every important stage of my life is occupied with the suffering of my loved one. *Debitor factus sum!* "

This awareness of being a debtor, a debtor of love and suffering became the key to understanding the pontificate of St. John Paul II.

I think that the consciousness of being loved is the foundation of taking merciful action, making great choices, and taking challenges. This awareness, in fact, gives man wings and compels him to repay his debt!

Are not the saints the ones who have understood how much God loves them?

Are they not the ones who have grasped the meaning of unselfish, boundless, and undeserved love?

And it is with this consciousness of the gift that has made them servants of charity, witnesses and instruments of divine love!

John Paul II made his life a gift for the Church and for his brethren. He was not one to just sit back and watch, but when, after the attempt against his life on May 13, 1981, he realized that his life was given to him for the second time, then and there he gave it completely to God through Mary.

When he was a young boy he loved poetry and theatre. He loved the literary word but when he met Christ, the Incarnated Word, he became his preacher, following in the steps of the biblical prophets. However, when illness deprived him of the ability to speak, when he could not utter a single word, but only hold the cross tightly to his chest and face, then he became a true, unquestionable witness of the Word of Christ.

His silent testimony spoke loudest, and his unspoken words struck our hearts as the quickest and most convincing. The great Apostle of charity, annihilated in his body, became a tangible sign of the pure merciful love of God!

He looked at the world with Mary's eyes and saw man in need of mercy. In fact, Mary's eyes are the eyes of a mother. Her gaze embraces us and reads what is in our hearts.

Mary looks at us with a mother's tenderness and she is able to reach our hearts to see our deepest needs. In her eyes there is no judgment and condemnation. There is only maternal love. She looks at us in the same way as she looks at her Son beneath her heart. The tenderness of Mary's maternal glance is a prelude to mercy. It invites us to come to her, so that we can experience it ourselves.

Mary looks at us with maternal insight. She can understand the pain one is suffering and what the body and spirit need. We can see this, for example, when she senses her cousin Elizabeth's pregnancy. Mary immediately leaves Nazareth and goes to the service of love to Elizabeth. We can also find the confirmation of this capacity in Cana of Galilee, where Mary is the first one who sees that there is no wine and, in a very discreet way, draws the attention of her Son to the embarrassing predicament for the young spouses.

This capacity of insightful perception is the basis of what we call the "imagination of love." That is, the ability to meet these expectations and needs, which man cannot or is ashamed to say.

In meetings with John Paul II, we experienced something very similar. He had the ability to speak to our hearts, and his speaking was the voice of a caring father.

I would like to bring up the story of Sister Teresa from Myanmar. During the last papal audience in which Sister Teresa participated, she was able to talk with John Paul II. She was so nervous that she did not know what to say. The only thing she could ask was, "Holy Father, what does it mean, "to be a saint?"

The pope did not say a word, but looked at her, embraced her and pressed her to his chest, so that she was able to hear his heartbeat. She told me that for her it was a very powerful answer. "To be saint" means to embrace people and make them hear the love present in your heart!

I like this story very much! I think it is the true definition of practical sainthood. Sister Teresa still resides in Myanmar with a small group of young sisters, the Apostles of St. John Paul II sharing with the poorest of the land her bread, her life, and her love towards Jesus!

To be able to perceive as Mary does also means being able to see the good in man. Her look can penetrate the depths of the human soul and bring out the good that is present in it. After all, every man is created in the image and likeness of God!

Pope Francis explains the meaning of this concept, using an example taken from home life: a mother, seeing the old and worn-out baby sweater, unravels it and from the scraps of wool knits a new one. We are such a "weaving" of God's love. God's mercy does not destroy man but allows him to "change" his life so that he can regain his glory and become the true image of Christ.

I remember the story that happened during John Paul II's visit to Canada in 1984. The Pope took the train to Montreal. During the ride the train slowed down considerably while going through neighbourhoods. Nearby, there lived a girl whose life was very troubled: she used drugs, abused sex, didn't work and had eliminated God from her life. She was going through very difficult times and even thinking about suicide. Not knowing why, when the pope was passing slowly past her house, she peered out the window and faced the pope who looked at her from his window. Their eyes met. The Pope smiled and blessed her. As she later shared, at that moment, she felt loved. She saw in the Pope's eyes only love and affection. That brief moment changed her life and today she is deeply involved in parish community life. This moment of love changed her.

I think we really need to learn to look at people in order to release the good in them, to help them discover the good present in their hearts! We must believe in the regenerative power of love!

Dear friends! I am deeply convinced that John Paul II lived as the debtor of love. His entire life was a response to what he felt people's hearts needed. He knew how much a man wants to be loved and was able to love him. He knew how much a man needs hope and he was able to witness to hope indicating heaven as man's destiny. He encouraged peaceful activities, forgiveness and dialogue. By his life, by his suffering, by his death, he invited people to give meaning to their daily lives by opening it to the presence of Christ and his gospel.

When he said, "Don't be afraid, open the door of your heart to Christ," he urged us to live our ordinary daily lives according to high standards; that is, to fill them with love for God and for others!

My dear friends, let us pray to the Lord, through the intercession of Holy Mary and St. John Paul II, so that we, too, may continue to experience being loved!

Let us open our eyes and hearts to a world in which we can give good gifts to repay the debt of love!