**MARY, THE PREGNANT VIRGIN** Part One

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Pope Francis entitles the fifth and final chapter of *Evangelii Gaudium,* “Spirit-Filled Evangelizers”. In his introduction to that chapter, he writes, “How I long to find the right words to stir up enthusiasm for a new chapter of evangelization full of fervour, joy, generosity, courage, boundless love and attraction.”

We do hear some people say today, “Is the new spirit of life within the Church generated by Pope Francis too good to last?” Undoubtedly, Pope Francis has vastly improved the image of the Church worldwide since his election. But, as he himself only too readily acknowledges, the work of renewing the Church cannot be left to one man, no matter what position he may hold. And yet, the type of renewal in life that the Pope calls for is vitally important, it is incumbent upon us all that we do not allow this moment of favour to pass.

I believe that Pope Francis has already given a new credibility to the life of the Church, but credibility must continually be gained and can easily be lost – as we have seen in the life of the Church in the not too distant past.

If the Church is to be credible, the task that confronts it is to mediate God to the world. The temptation that confronts the Church is to substitute for God. Perhaps, it is within this context that we might understand the significance in the Pope’s choice to focus the second section of Chapter 5 and the final section of the Exhortation on Mary, whom he speaks of as Mother of Evangelization in that she gives birth to the Word of God in our world; Mary, the Star of Evangelization in that the qualities of life she shows attracts us all in our work of evangelization. Indeed, she is the model for an evangelization that, to use the Pope’s words, is “full of fervour, joy, generosity, courage, boundless love and attraction.” We Franciscans, who are called to live and share the Gospel, have a key role to play. We cannot play that role unless our hearts are inspired .

I believe that contemplation of Mary can have such a vital place in that process. As P o p e Francis says, “She is the Mother of the Church that evangelizes and without her we could never truly understand the new evangelization.”

Mary is not only the mother of Jesus but the Mother of the Church: this image has long been present within Christian spirituality. Within our own Franciscan tradition, Clare of Assisi often employs maternal imagery in her writings and incorporates the model of Mary, the pregnant Virgin. Maternal imagery was prevalent in medieval spiritual writings. St Bernard speaks of spiritual persons as ‘holy mothers (bringing) souls to birth.’ Clare speaks of the Virgin Mary as the one who holds Eternal Beauty within the enclosure of her womb and gives birth to the Word of God in the world. And then she moves on to say,

As the glorious Virgin of virgins carried Him materially, so you, too, by following in her footprints, can, without any doubt, always carry Him spiritually and give birth to him. (3L Ag. 24).

I think this language is important, the language of birth, of fertility. If all is arid and dry, there is no life. Life is associated with fertility – indeed Pope Francis has urged priests and religious not to be arid and dry but to be fertile. What else is evangelization but to continue to give birth to the Word of God in our world?

Francis of Assisi composed a *Salutation of the Blessed Virgin Mary*. Interestingly he includes Mary in the life and activity of the Trinity.

Mary, holy Mother of God, you are the Virgin made Church and the one chosen by the most holy Father in heaven whom he consecrated with his most holy beloved Son and with the Holy Spirit, the Paraclete.

Mary comes to participate in the life of the Trinity, the life of God. This Salutation is linked with another Salutation Francis composed, the *Salutation of the Virtues*, implying that it is through Mary’s living out the life of the virtues that she comes to this state of being Godlike.

Lest we think this might be akin to equating Mary and God, it is important to remember that the task of becoming Godlike is linked with the original meaning of ‘hierarchy’ as expounded by the great 6th Century Syrian spiritual writer, the Pseudo-Dionysius. The concept of hierarchy has its origins not in the language of power structures but in the language of spirituality and life with God.

The goal of a hierarchy, then, is to enable beings to be as like as possible to God and to be at one with him. A hierarchy has God as it leader of all understanding and action...

Hierarchy causes its members to be images of God in all respects, to be clear and spotless mirrors reflecting the glow of primordial light and indeed of God himself. It ensures that, when its members have received this full and divine splendour, they can then pass on this light generously.

The whole Church, not just one group within the Church, constitutes the hierarchy.

All are called to become Godlike by means of taking into ourselves the virtues, the qualities of life that pertain to God. Mary becomes the model of such virtues. If the Virgin has been made Church, the Church has to become like the Virgin. Mary is the model of the Church, the model of the faithful. The Church, and each of us as members of the Church, becomes truly Church when our hearts are infused with the virtues that pertain to Mary.