

**Spiritual Formation Notebooks CSFN
No. 1**

The Word of God

in the Life and Writings
of Blessed Mary of Jesus

the Good Shepherd

Frances Siedliska

S. Noela Wojtatowicz CSFN

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FOREWORD

Dear Sisters,

We joyfully present *Notebook One* from the series *Notebooks on the Spiritual Formation of the Congregation of the Sisters of the Holy Family of Nazareth* which treat of the spirituality of Blessed Mary of Jesus the Good Shepherd. Over the years we have endeavoured to depict our Foundress' spirituality in various ways, to go into it in greater depth. However, despite all that has already been written, we still do not feel satisfied. There was another earnest request at the XXIII General Chapter (Decree 2) *for the writings of our Mother Foundress, as well as material concerning her, to be made available to our sisters and to other people.*

Notebook One is an attempt to respond to the request. At the same time it is the initiation of a certain approach to explore Blessed Mary's spirituality, and also to go into it in greater depth. We hope that this approach will be continued by the many other sisters who will be invited to participate in this enterprise. The General Administration will spare no effort to coordinate further work, and to have it all translated into the Congregation's two main languages – Polish and English. We trust that a small collection of books about Blessed Mary's spirituality will thus arise, which will not only serve us, her spiritual daughters, but all those who want to come to know Blessed Mary better, and who want to glean information from her spiritual treasure trove.

The subject matter of *Notebook One* is linked with the first year of the Congregation's renewal, initiated on the first Sunday of Advent, 2010. We then stood anew before the Word, Who daily invites us to be converted. So let us, together with Blessed Mary, continue our life-long pilgrimage of faith, until our meeting with the Word, a meeting that will last forever.

Many thanks to Sister Noel Wojtatowicz for *Notebook One*, for such an insightful study of the Foundress' message. Many thanks also to the Provincial Superiors, who, at the Planning Commission meeting in Lourdes (September, 2013), readily accepted this initiative and encouraged us to continue it.

Finally, I hope that *Notebook One* will be an adventure for all on their personal path of faith, to a meeting with the Word, with the One Who became Flesh in Nazareth.

In the love of the Holy Family,
Mother Jana Zawieja, CSFN
Superior General

INTRODUCTION TO THE SUBJECT OF SPIRITUALITY

Spirituality (in the wide sense of the word) always refers to a human person. It is associated with the gift of humanity, and concerned with *certain activities, including religious activities, which, in the case of Christianity, assume God's life within us, as well as a dynamic development of grace.*¹ We can speak of various spiritualities that arose in the Church - through the inspiration of the Holy Spirit - thanks to people who had intensely experienced particular mysteries connected with the life of Jesus Christ our Lord.

Hence we do not have just one theology of religious life, for every institute has, or ought to have, its own "school" of spirituality.² A founder is a "personal" means of communicating a gift of God to an institute. Hence, too, *in wanting to interpret and understand one's own vocation, on entering an institution, one ought to come to know the founder well.*³ A founder's charisma is a special gift, a grace of the Holy Spirit, which allows him or her to explore one of the truths of faith in greater depth; in a "new" way. *This special gift of the Holy Spirit, like a beam of strong light, allows the recipient to "see" the mystery, to perceive that which others do not see.*⁴

However, a charisma is not a static thing. Every institute: community or religious congregation ought to be a kind of *charismatic movement.*⁵ Its dynamism is but the continuous development of the founder's charisma, its realisation in the developing history of the Church, nation and world. Thus new ways and possibilities emerge within the scope of the gift's unchangeable essence. So a founder's charisma forms the main lines of every institute's spirituality. A founder's spirit manifests itself in all its strength at the beginnings of an institute, as the so-called *founding charisma*⁶, and the founding vision, as well as the germ of the charisma, is conveyed to future members. A spirituality emerges, as a response to the gift, and as a way of receiving the gift.⁷ So it primarily arises in day to day life, and it is only later that it is theologically and legally formulated. This "beginning", an institute's spring (the time of the founder, and the community's first members), is usually characterized by the newness of God's original inspiration, by enthusiasm and creative dynamism.

Therefore it seems that in delving "into the depths of the soul" of Frances Siedliska, it is necessary to draw attention to the historical-cultural and ecclesial life of the Foundress, as well as the most important theological concepts through which the Holy Spirit shaped her charisma and spirituality. *That which in the beginning is, as it were, a germ – a seed- in the*

¹ The spirituality of the Sisters of Nazareth has been explored in greater depth in: Sr. M. T. Górska, CSFN, *The Spirituality of the Congregation of the Sisters of the Holy Family of Nazareth*, in *Consecrated Life*, no. 6 (68) 2007, (November – December 2007), pp. 85-94.

² This subject has been explored in depth in: F. Wulf, *Fenomenologia teologica della vita religiosa*, in *Misterium Salutis VII*, Brescia 1975, pp. 851-854.

³ P. Liszka, *The Charisma of Religious Life*, Warsaw 2002, p. 156.

⁴ Sr. M. T. Górska, CSFN, *Spirituality of the Congregation...*, op. cit., p. 88.

⁵ Ibid. p. 90.

⁶ F. Ciardi discusses the issue of a *founding charisma* in: *Los fundadores hombres del Espiritu – para una teología del carisma del fundador*, Madrid 1983, p. 13.

⁷ P. Liszka, op. cit., Warsaw 2002, p. 157.

*process of development, takes on a crystallized form at a later stage, but not a final one. The Holy Spirit, the “life-giving Spirit, breathes [life] wherever He wills”; He illuminates ever new aspects of one and the same reality.*⁸

So let us ask the life-giving Spirit for His light so that these flawed reflections - humanly speaking – might become, despite everything, fertile ground wherein each of us might find our roots, flowers and fruit...

OUR MOTHER FOUNDRESS’ “SPIRITUAL GEOGRAPHY”

Our starting point is Poland of the second half of the XIXth century and the beginning of the XXth century. The turn of these centuries saw the heyday of spiritual life in a Poland occupied by three invaders. Paradoxically, a time of the highest number of Polish saints and blessed, a time of numerous new congregations, a growing Marian pilgrimage movement, a heyday of Polish mysticism studies and experiential mysticism in the form of diaries and spiritual journals, a spring of Catholic education and spiritual theology (mysticism studies) at the universities of Kraków, Lwów, Vilnius and Warsaw.⁹ These cities were also centres that played an important role in forming Polish spirituality. Apart from these larger urban agglomerations, Reverend Professor Stanisław Urbański mentions several others,¹⁰ of which Mohylew-Pińsk and Nowe Miasto nad Pilicą are important to us, as they, in various ways, shaped Poland’s spiritual life and religiousness.¹¹ *One can say – observes Reverend Professor Urbański – that at that time the Polish nation produced the highest number of saints in the Church. (...). These saints not only played a fundamental role in evangelizing Poland, but they also made a great contribution to the formation of a Christian identity in Central Europe. Taking no heed of the various difficulties created by the invaders, they undertook, amongst other things, work in education, welfare, publishing and health services in the Gospel spirit on a wide scale. (...). Thanks to them, their inner strength, the Faith was saved during times of conflict with the Church. It is worth stressing that, despite the various kinds of political-cultural changes and transformations that have occurred over the century, the spirit of these people is still felt.*¹²

Frances Siedliska – Blessed Mary of Jesus the Good Shepherd – is, of course, one of those in this select group of saints and blessed. Forty years later the beatified Sisters of Nazareth from Nowogródek, through their bloody sacrifices, were written into the Divine “Book of Life”. There are also those who – though they may not have formed them – had an evident influence on their personalities, and their growth in sanctity. The first group of people that had influenced, by their example and charisma, the spiritual life of our Foundress - and

⁸ Sr. M. T. Górską, CSFN, *Spirituality of the Congregation*, op. cit., p. 88.

⁹ Stanisław Urbański, *Introduction*, in *Witnesses of Polish Spirituality*, Warsaw 2004, p. 9.

¹⁰ The author also mentions: Poznań, Starą Wieś, Przemyśl, Miejsce Piastowe, Pniewy, Żytno-Parzno.

¹¹ *Ibid.* p. 90

¹² Stanisław Urbański, *An Outline of Polish Spirituality*, in *Witnesses...*, op. cit., pp. 13-14.

many other splendid and holy women of that time - was connected with a centre in **Nowe Miasto nad Pilicą**,¹³ which, fortunately, was not that far from the flourishing Siedliski family estate in Żdżary. That charismatic group matured under the guidance Blessed Honorat Koźmiński (1829-1916), an exceptional figure amongst founders in Church history and in Catholic spirituality, as, after the decline of religious life in Western Europe, and the dissolution of orders in the XIXth century Russian Poland [Russian Partition], this brave Capuchin founded twenty six congregations, of which three were habited. He renewed religious life in Poland in cooperation with other brothers, including Fr. Prokop Leszczyński (mystic, spiritual director and outstanding religious writer – known for his sanctity), and Fr. Leander Lenzian (an outstanding Warsaw preacher and founder (together with Helena Zbraniecka) of the Congregatio Sororum Nativitatis Beatae Mariae Virginis. It is worth adding that *the Capuchins were then at the pinnacle of all Polish orders with regard to the monastic spirit*.¹⁴ This group formed the young teenage Frances Siedliska and the religious climate of her family. She mentions these authors of XIXth century Capuchin spirituality in her writings. Here I have deliberately omitted Fr. Leander Lenzian's outstanding role and contribution in the development of her spiritual life, as it has already been presented and documented many a time in earlier works.

Another “spiritual triangle” that I want to draw attention to was formed by cities on the eastern frontiers of former Polish territory (now Belarus): **Minsk-Mohylew-Pińsk**, where Servant of God, Bishop Z. Łoziński¹⁵ - whose beatification process is under way - worked with great enthusiasm and dedication in response to the needs of the Church. A fruit of his persistent prayers and efforts is the apostolic and ecumenical presence of the Sisters of Nazareth in Nowogródek, crowned by the testimony of a love stronger than death, that is, the martyrdom of eleven Sisters of Nazareth on the 1st of August, 1943.

And of course one cannot omit the place that most decidedly determined the form of Frances Siedliska's work – Rome. B. Jański, an economist, lawyer, convert and mystic, was active in the first half of the XIXth century amidst people of the so-called [Polish] Great Emigration.¹⁶ After his conversion (1832), he organised the United Brothers – from which the Congregation of the Resurrection of Our Lord Jesus Christ originated – in order to deepen the spiritual life of his fellow countrymen, to “train clergy in the West for the enslaved Fatherland in order to bring about out an evangelical renewal for the defence of holy truth and to propagate it under the banner of the resurrected Saviour”.¹⁷ The main task of the order was the re-Christianization of society, the religious renewal of fellow country men in exile as well as those in partitioned Poland. Many contributed to the realisation of such a wide patriotic education programme for Poles, as well as to *the renewal of the spiritual life of believers and conversion of non-believers, for example: Fr. P. Semenenko, Fr. H. Kajsiewicz and Fr. P. Smolikowski, as well as J. Karska, M. Darowska, J. and C. Borzęcka. They – but mainly Fr.*

¹³ Names and phrases that are in bold, underlined, particularly from the Bible, are the author's, Sr. Noela Wojtatowicz's.

¹⁴ Z. Szczęsny Feliński, *Memoirs*, Warsaw 1986, p. 488 and following pages.

¹⁵ Stanisław Urbański, *An Outline of Polish Spirituality*, in *Witnesses...*, op. cit., p. 14.

¹⁶ Polish emigration in the first half of the XIXth century was of a patriotic-political nature, whilst the direct cause was the failure of the November Uprising of 1830. The main emigrant centre was France (mainly Paris), with smaller centres in other European cities, for example, Rome.

¹⁷ Stanisław Urbański, *Introduction*, in *Witnesses...*, op. cit., p. 8.

*P. Semenenko – created the foundations of a new Polish school of spirituality, a school in exile, which formed the religiousness of Poles in exile and in partitioned Poland.*¹⁸

Frances Siedliska not only had the opportunity to get to know the majority of those outstanding people, but also, with the spiritual help of Fr. P. Semenenko, and primarily that of Fr. A. Lechert, to join that religious renewal; yet she wholly retained the charismatic identity which the Holy Spirit had entrusted to her for the formation of a new religious order. *Although the protagonists of that renewal of the Church in Poland and Europe (particularly Italy and France) - the Capuchins and Resurrectionists - very positively influenced and surrounded our Foundress and her “germinating” work with particular spiritual solicitude, it developed in its own original way - determined by the Holy Spirit - and responded to the needs of the Church of the XIXth and XXth centuries. So it is essential that we interpret this gift anew, in the light of the realities and challenges of the Church of the XXIst century.*

Today Blessed Mary of Jesus the Good Shepherd, by virtue of having been brought up in the spiritual realities of a country that links the Christianity of East and West, is to us a Mother who teaches unity in diversity, and love amidst daily problems. In order that we might become “one family”, in accord with Jesus’ prayer, *that they may be one...*,¹⁹ it is necessary for us to first seek that which unites us, and not that which divides us. And that is undoubtedly our Foundress’ attitude and her spiritual message in her numerous writings.

Following the inspiration of the Holy Spirit, Who invigorates us in the Congregation’s work of renewal, that is, an attempt at a new interpretation of our place in Nazareth, the Church and the world, I invite one and all to abide by Mother Mary in that which unites us: in meditating on the word of God in the context of her spiritual legacy.

So these reflections conform with the subject of the first year of the Congregation’s renewal. They open the way for us to explore the depths or, perhaps, rather discover the depths of the spirituality of the Sisters of Nazareth from the perspective of issues that are of relevance today and tomorrow, as indicated by God and the Church...

1. The Word of God Manifesting Himself in the Bible as a Reality and as a Person

The Word of God manifests Himself as a **reality**: *living, effectual* (cf. *Heb* 4: 12-13), *everlasting* (cf. *Is* 40: 8), *almighty* (cf. *Wis* 18: 15), *creative* (cf. *Gen* 1), *constituting history*; a transcendental reality, more profound than Holy Scripture. The **Bible** is His visible sign; with its help He communicates with man. So Holy Scripture is His “icon”, “sacrament”, “tabernacle”. The Bible, as a book written under the inspiration of God, is the Lord’s word; totally Christ-oriented.²⁰

So the Word of God is, to the highest degree, **Jesus Christ**, God and man (cf. *Jn* 1: 1). In Him we seek the answer as to how to become saints. And we find it in *the Word that*

¹⁸ *Ibid.*, pp. 8-9.

¹⁹ This comes from Jesus’ so-called “high priestly prayer” for His disciples; ... *that they may all be one; even as thou, Father, art in me, and I in thee...* (*Jn* 17: 21).

²⁰ Cf. *Jn* 5: 39: ... *it is they (the scriptures) that bear witness to me.*

became Flesh. Through the eyes of faith a believer can discover the splendour of future, eternal glory in the frailty of Jesus' human nature (cf. *Jn* 1: 14). Analogically, every Christian is invited to discover the glory of Christ, the image of the Father, in Holy Scripture.

Pope Benedict the XVIth explains the analogy of the Word of God as follows: (...) *the Synod Fathers affirmed about the different ways in which we speak of "the word of God". They rightly referred to a symphony of the word, to a single word expressed in multiple ways: "a polyphonic hymn". The Synod Fathers pointed out that human language operates analogically in speaking of the word of God. In effect, this expression, while referring to God's self-communication, also takes on a number of different meanings which need to be carefully considered and related among themselves, from the standpoint both of theological reflection and pastoral practice. As the Prologue of John clearly shows us, the Logos refers in the first place to the eternal Word, the only Son, begotten of the Father before all ages and consubstantial with him: the word was with God, and the word was God. But this same Word, Saint John tells us, "became flesh" (Jn 1:14); hence Jesus Christ, born of the Virgin Mary, is truly the Word of God who has become consubstantial with us. Thus the expression "word of God" here refers to the person of Jesus Christ, the eternal Son of the Father, made man. While the Christ event is at the heart of divine revelation, we also need to realize that creation itself, the 'liber naturae', is an essential part of this symphony of many voices in which the one word is spoken (VD, 7).*

The word of God, eternally expressed by God the Father, in the love of the Holy Spirit, signifies a dialogue; it leads us to the community of the Holy Spirit, to the depths of existence, the fullness of happiness. God, in Jesus Christ, the Eternal Word, chose us before the creation of the world, *he destined us in love to be his sons* (cf. *Eph* 1: 4-5). So thanks to the Word of God each person receives the ability to enter into a relation with God and the whole of creation. Hence Holy Scripture is a dialogue, not a monologue. *They [Synod Fathers] rightly referred to a symphony of the word, to a single word expressed in multiple ways: "a polyphonic hymn" (cf. Heb 1:1) - writes Benedict the XVIth in his Exhortation (cf. VD, 7).*

The Bible is often described as a *covenant dialogue*, wherein God and man communicate as if they were members of one family, and as the *historia salutis*, for it has not crystallized into abstract and static formulas, but into a living experience of a dynamic history, accomplished by people and events, words and actions. Thus the Bible, as a collection of holy texts, pulsating with the life-giving power of the Word of God, plays an essential role in one's experience, recognition and openness to God's Presence, as well as in the process of growth and maturation in this experience.²¹

2. Holy Scripture and the Development of Biblical Studies in Blessed Frances Siedliska's Times

The interpretation of sacred Scripture would remain incomplete were it not to include listening to 'those who have truly lived the word of God: namely, the saints' - says the Holy

²¹ Cf. S. J. Baez Ortega, *La Bibbia e i mistici carmelitani*, Teresianum, Roma 2007, p. 1.

Father, Benedict the XVIth. - *Indeed, “viva lectio est vita bonorum”. The most profound interpretation of Scripture comes precisely from those who let themselves be shaped by the word of God through listening, reading and assiduous meditation. It is certainly not by chance that the great currents of spirituality in the Church’s history originated with an explicit reference to Scripture (VD, 48).*

The above teaching and encouragement of the Vicar of Christ is a special invitation for us to explore in greater depth, in the light of the Bible, the spiritual legacy of Mother Mary of Jesus the Good Shepherd. For in drawing the “water of life” from various sources it is essentially based on Holy Scripture, as well as on her own spiritual experiences, experiences that matured in the light of the presence of the Word of God.

Easy access to the Bible – and believers’ familiarity with Holy Scripture – was more apparent during certain periods of Church history than other periods. The books of Holy Scripture were translated and copied without intervention on the part of the Magisterium right up until the XIth century. It was not until the Middle Ages, with the appearance of the heretical Cathar, Waldenses and Albanenses movements (at the close of the XIIth and XIIIth centuries), that limitations were introduced as to the use of Bible translations in national languages. Private reading of the Bible was also viewed distrustfully, because of the fear of inappropriate interpretations. These reservations concerned certain areas in France, Aragon and Spain.²²

After the invention of printing in the XVth century, many editions of the Bible appeared in Latin and in national languages. Initially, biblical editing was not regulated by any Church rules. However, it shortly turned out that printing could become a dangerous instrument to propagate heresy; so censorship began to be introduced re works destined for publication.²³ Stricter restrictions with regard to editing in general, but especially biblical, appeared with the rise of reform movements. In 1515 Pope Leo the Xth (died 1521) issued a bull ordering bishops and inquisitors to read material destined to be printed. It was an offence to publish books without the publisher’s address and the author’s name. The publication of Bibles in national languages was forbidden without permission.²⁴ As in the Middle Ages, so too in the first half of the XVIth century, the Catholic Church’s opposition to Bibles in national languages was not aimed directly at the translations themselves, but at the errors spread by them, and also against the thus promoted private reading of Bibles that rejected the official teaching of the Church.²⁵

The Bible was again the centre of religious interest in Renaissance Europe, evoking many contradictory opinions on the relation of Scripture and Tradition, canon and interpretation. However, the problem of abuses and errors in the translation and printing of holy writ appeared again. The Fathers of the Council of Trent took up these matters during the

²² Similar restrictions appeared locally in Germany in the XIVth century, and in England at the beginning of the XVth century with the circulation of John Wycliffe’s (died 1384) translation of the Bible. It is necessary to stress that there was no ban on reading the Bible. The intention of Church and lay legislators was primarily to protect believers from heretical national interpretations of the Bible; the existence of numerous Bible translations in languages in the Middle Ages, some of which even had the official approval of the Church, testifies to this.

²³ The first restrictions as to Bibles in national languages were in Germany and Spain in the 1570s and 1580s.

²⁴ *The Cambridge History of the Bible*, vol. 3, ed. S. L. Greenslade, London 1963, pp. 430-431.

²⁵ *La Bibbia nell’epoca moderna e contemporanea*, ed. R. Fabris, Bologna 1992, pp. 32-33.

fourth session of their deliberations (1546).²⁶ The pontificate of Benedict the XIVth (1740-1758) saw better times for reading Holy Scripture. In the constitution, *Sollicita ac Provida*, this pope ruled that additional permission for reading national translations was not necessary if they had the Holy See's approval, or if they contained appropriate explanatory notes based on the works of Church Fathers. Successive popes: Pius the VIIth (1800-1823), Pius the VIIIth (1829-1830), Gregory the XVIth (1831-1846) and Pius the IXth (1846-1878) kept this ruling in force.

This – very simplified of course – outline of Bible history will help us to understand its position in the XIXth century. A novelty of that period was the rise of numerous Bible societies connected with Protestant communities whose was [is] to popularize Holy Scripture via the publication and distribution of the Bible in national languages.²⁷ In accord with the principle accepted by British and Overseas Bible Society in London (1813), Holy Scripture was published without the Deuterocanonical books. The motivation of Bible societies was unclear to the Magisterium, for it was based on the conviction that Holy Scripture was the sole rule of faith, and that of itself it was intelligible to all. Editions circulated by these societies were without explanatory notes based on the universal teaching of the Church Fathers and the Magisterium. Catholics found errors in those translations too. So consecutive popes²⁸ warned believers against those editions of Holy Scripture. As in earlier periods, so too in the XIXth century, the restrictions imposed by the Catholic Church as to the publication of Bibles were not the result of the Magisterium's aversion to Holy Scripture, but a sign of its solicitude for the purity and orthodoxy of such translations. Catholic translations, with appropriate notes, commentaries and Church approval, were permitted. On the other hand, considering that the *promoters of biblical progress were in large measure Protestants, distrust existed, but there was also an openness to their reflections and suggestions.*²⁹

Frances Siedliska (1842-1902) appears in the XIXth century, a century that was characterised in Europe by a full bloom of the exact sciences, notable technological progress, but also - as a consequence of the aforementioned cautiousness of the Catholic Church - by a certain stagnation in biblical studies.

That situation lasted well nigh to the end of the XIXth century. The closing years of that century saw the beginnings of a fresh look at Holy Scripture, and consequently a heyday of biblical studies. However, before we come to those “seven years” of biblical abundance, we have to appreciate the fact that the young Frances Siedliska's initial interest in the Word of God appeared during the “Żdzarski” period, and so at a time and place diametrically opposed to other times and places because of the exceptionally dramatic historical circumstances of that region of Europe. The turn of the XIXth and XXth centuries - when our Foundress came to

²⁶ It turned out that it was necessary to announce the authenticity of the Vulgate in matters of faith and morals. It was to be the basic text in disputes and in preaching. The Fathers thus wanted to eliminate incorrect Bibles from official use.

²⁷ See J. Kudasiewicz, J. Pytel, *Bible Societies I*, in *A Catholic Encyclopedia*, Lublin 1976, vol. 2, cmt: 488.

²⁸ The most important encyclicals on these issues are: Pius the VIIIth, *Traditi humilitati* (24-05-1829); Gregory the XVIth, *Inter praecipuas (De Societatibus Biblicarum machinationibus)* (08-05-1844); Pius the IXth, *Qui pluribus (De sectis et Societatibus Biblicis)* (09-11-1846).

²⁹ W. Chrostowski, *Catholic Biblical Studies in Poland on the Verge of the XXIst Century*, in *The XXth Century Context*, in *Catholic Biblical Commentary*, “Vocatio”, Warsaw 2001, p. 1757.

the end of her earthly path in Rome - was a decadent time for the Polish nation, having been subjected to Russian, Prussian and Austrian partitions for more than a hundred years. The lives and opportunities of Poles in those annexations varied. However, numerous restrictions and repressions that limited the development of learning and national culture were alike in all the annexations. *On the one hand, there was (...) a certain lag in knowledge regarding world biblical achievements, whilst on the other hand (...) a great endeavour was evident in assimilating those achievements and transplanting them to Poland. (...). Strong links between Polish Catholic biblical studies and Rome were clearly evident almost throughout (...) the whole century...*³⁰

It was not easy, of course, as contact was hindered even within annexed areas, which did not make for an exchange of ideas or for cooperation; whilst Russification and Germanization tendencies also grew. The Church and Catholic piety were often the only counterbalances to it all. A growth in emigration was also not an insignificant fact. That multi-million wave of Polish intellectuals that flooded Western countries (particularly France and Italy), gave rise to splendid literature outside the Fatherland. The most outstanding authors, at home and abroad, were: A. Mickiewicz, J. Słowacki, Z. Krasiński, H. Sienkiewicz, E. Orzeszkowa, S. Żeromski, and many others. They had considerable knowledge of the New and Old Testaments, as evidenced by numerous quotes, allusions, motifs or biblical stylizations that enriched their work.³¹ *That peculiar exegesis, often “to cheer people's hearts”, became part of the collective consciousness of Poles for good.*³² It is difficult to doubt that the educated “offspring” of the Siedliski family enthusiastically devoured – actuated both by religious and patriotic motivations – these pearls of Polish literature.

However, Fr. Jakub Wujek’s successively renewed Polish translations of the Bible were the basis of faith, piety and biblical culture. The first edition, published at the end of the XVIth century, almost immediately became the Polish translation *par excellence*.³³ It was read not only by Catholics, but by Protestants too. *One could say, without any exaggeration, that it helped Poles to survive and preserve their national and religiousness identity during the most difficult period of our history.*³⁴ There was also no lack of Poles at that difficult time with a thorough theological education, received at Polish and then at Roman colleges (particularly the *Gregorianum*). Some Poles remained in Rome, but the majority returned home, taking works of contemporary theology (including biblical) with them.³⁵

³⁰ Ibid.

³¹ There are several M.A. theses and other academic works on the subject by Sisters of Nazareth: (Sr. Eliza) I. German, *The Bible in the Work of Stefan Żeromski*, in *Religious Issues in Positivist Literature and the New Poland*, Lublin 1993; I. German, *A List of Biblical References in the Works of Żeromski*, “*Annals of Arts*”, 1993; (Sr. Noela) M. Wotatowicz, *The Bible and Man in the Work of Stefan Żeromski*, in *Amongst Wanderers and Wayfarers. New Poland Studies*, Lublin 2001; M. Wojtatowicz, *Biblical Stylization in the Novels of Stefan Żeromski*, in *Biblical Inspirations and Motifs in Positivist Literature and the New Poland*, Lublin 1999, pp. 41-79; B. Noetzel, *Biblical Stylization in the Historical Novels of Henryk Sienkiewicz*, “*Annals of Arts*”, vol. XLII, 1994, fasc. 6, pp.55-87; (Sr. Cordia), K. Wilczewska, *Biblical Inspirations in the Work of Eliza Orzeszkowa*, KUL, Lublin 2000.

³² W. Chrostowski, *Catholic Biblical Studies...*, op. cit., p. 1757.

³³ Ibid.

³⁴ Ibid.

³⁵ We can clearly see an apologetic and polemic trend, connected with the then lively discussions on the historicity of the Bible, in Polish Catholic biblical studies at the close of the XIXth century. More on this subject in Fr. W. Chrostowski’s work, quoted above (cf. p. 1758).

The second half of the XIXth century saw a growth in rationalistic criticism of Holy Scripture, which attempted to undermine the basis of Catholic belief as to the inspiration and inerrancy of Holy Scripture, particularly in the natural and historical fields. Catholic biblical study was unable to counter - as it then seemed – the scientific arguments of the adherents of rationalism. Hence Pope Leo the XIIIth (1878-1903) issued his encyclical, *Providentissimus Deus*, to counter errors and raise the level of Catholic biblical studies.³⁶ In the encyclical he determined the fundamental directives as to the development of exegesis; to encourage the study of it, and to commend it in a way that was most appropriate for the times. The Vulgate was still to be the basis of theological lectures, but the use of other ancient translations and original texts was recommended. Moreover, in order to raise the level of Catholic biblical studies, the pope recommended the study of ancient biblical languages.

Pope Leo the XIIIth, in the constitution, *Officiorum ac Munerum*, of the 25th of January, 1897, and in the papal brief, *Romani Pontifices*, issued for the new *Index* of the 17th of September, 1970, abolished and revoked the hitherto laws in the *Index* and introduced his own rules concerning the publication and use of Holy Scripture. The document did not prohibit the use of Holy Scripture in national languages, even without a bishop's, parish priest's or a confessor's opinion, if the publication had been approved by the Holy See (commentaries were not necessary), or had been published "subject to the scrupulous care of a bishop" (in which case it had to contain a commentary). Leo the XIIIth thus removed the fourth rule, of 1564, from the *Index*, which limited believers in general in using Holy Scripture translations.

In consequence of those events and decisions, the last ten years of the life Mary of Jesus the Good Shepherd was a veritable "spring" of biblical studies in the Catholic Church. Although the young Frances did not receive a satisfactory biblical formation, she, however, had read the whole Bible. So she interpreted the Word of God in accord with her own methods, which differed from a typical exegesis or a scholarly apprehension. The Siedliski family no doubt had a copy of the Jakub Wujek Bible,³⁷ which was so popular in Poland. Numerous biblical quotes in Latin in her *Diaries* and other writings indicate that she also made use of the Vulgate.³⁸ It is probable that she, knowing other languages well, also explored the Word of God in depth in the Italian and French versions of the Bible.³⁹

³⁶ Cf. *The Bible in Church Documents. Selection of Texts and Commentaries, to Better Hear the Word of the Lord*, eds R. Pietkiewicz, A. Jankowski, H. Lempa, Wrocław 1997, pp. 7-18.

³⁷ The **Jakub Wujek Bible** – a Polish translation by a Jesuit, Fr. Jakub Wujek, first published complete in 1599. It was one of the attempts at translating the Bible from Latin to Polish. It was commissioned by religious authorities after the assent of Pope Gregory the XIIIth. It replaced the Jan Leopolda Bible - *Biblia Leopolda* - (the first complete Bible printed in Polish in 1561) and was the basic Polish Catholic translation for 367 years until the Millennium Bible – the first Catholic translation in Polish from the original languages (1965).

³⁸ **Vulgate** (Latin, *versio vulgate*, common translation, popular) - Latin translation by St. Jerome in the years 382-406 from the original languages, Hebrew and Greek. St. Jerome's work was the first book to be printed (Gutenberg Bible). The XVIth to XXth centuries saw many critical editions. For over a thousand years, to the XXth century, it was the basic text of the Church in the West; to the XXIst century eight thousand manuscripts of it have been preserved.

³⁹ It is probable that our Foundress used the **La Sainte Bible, traduction de Glaire**. The New Testament in this translation appeared in 1861, and the whole edition, in three volumes, between 1871 and 1873. This Bible served Catholics in France for about 30 years. After 1894, Blessed Mary was able to use a yet better translation, that is, in original languages: **La Sainte Bible traduction de A. Crampon** – published in seven volumes between 1894 and 1904. In Italy, the translation that had the greatest influence and reach throughout the whole of the XIXth century was based on the Vulgate. The translator was an abbot, Antonio Martini, archbishop of Florence from

Blessed Mary's assimilation of biblical texts also proceeded in an indirect way; through religious books. During the formation of the new order she also familiarized herself with virtually all the rules of the orders that then existed, all their wealth of biblical quotes and references, particularly those from the Gospel. No doubt the liturgy, Breviary and participation at Mass were other sources of her biblical knowledge, as well as her attentiveness to homilies and the instructions of her spiritual directors.

3. Particular Encounters with the Word of God during the Course of Blessed Frances Siedliska's Life

We can also see Frances Siedliska's fascination and love for the Word of God in the events of her life. She received a "small reliquary", which she always carried with her, from her confessor, Fr. Leander, as far back as the "Żdżarski"⁴⁰ period, that is, before the beginning of her religious life. It contained Gospel verses that were read in Poland during Corpus Christi processions. Blessed Mary notes in her *Autobiography: I accepted it with great reverence and gratitude, as a relic in triplicate; I hardly dared to carry it with me, in order not to profane such holy things* (A, 152). In her "Rome" period, already a nun and founder of a new religious order, she always had a small format Gospel in her habit pocket. She meditated on it daily, and introduced the daily custom of reading and listening to it communally into the Congregation.⁴¹

However, Frances Siedliska sought the Lord's "presence" in the Bible through the knowledge of love, rather than just through information about Him. The Bible speaks of God, Who, to her, was primarily a Friend. So she desired to know His secrets, the designs of His heart... Blessed Mary read and meditated on the Bible in order to hear God, and to come to know the One Who had taken possession of her heart by His deeds. She wanted to know His desires in order to respond to them. And so, without any professional theological preparation, without knowing anything about university exegesis, she discovered her own way of reading the Bible.

Her fascination with the Word of God began to bloom with the first shoots of spring in 1873. It was, admittedly, after the passage of many years before she described this in her *Autobiography*, but she did it with precision and intensity of feeling, which recalls the Annunciation. So it is worth being familiar with this touching "photograph" of her soul:

On the 19th of March I learned that the Lord Jesus, in His Divine mercy, had chosen me for Himself, so that I might become a nun, His Spouse (...). Father told me to devote myself to the Lord (...), Who was calling me, to devote myself to anything that He would want to do with me, and to prepare my soul to take three religious vows. To me they

1781. It was printed in Turin: The New Testament, in six volumes (1769-1771); the Old Testament, in seventeen volumes (1775-1781). **La Bibbia del Martini** was printed over forty times in the XIXth century.

⁴⁰ In reality it was a large locket.

⁴¹ *Testimony of M. G. Lubowidzka, [in:] Sacra Congregatio Pro Causis Sanctorum, ROMANA BEATIFICATIONIS ET CANONIZATIONIS SERVAE DEI MARIAE A JESU BONO PASTORE (In Saec.: Franciscae De Siedliska) Fundatricis Instituti Sacrae Familiae a Nazareth, Positio Super Virtutibus*, vol. I, Ex typis Guerra et Belli, Roma 1977, p. 101.

were miracles, miracles of God's love. The Lord Jesus was thinking about me, me, such nothingness (...). I accepted all this in great faith, and a thought came to me, to seek in the Holy Gospel, from that day on, an explanation for all that Father had told me. It was Good Friday. There was a different Gospel for each day. I took a missal and read the Lord Jesus' holy words, and it seemed to me that what Fr. Leander had said to me had a strange connection with the Gospel for that day. So I copied certain passages. That day, for example, when Fr. Leander said that God had chosen me for great things (...), the Church reading was about the Samaritan woman, my beloved passage. It seemed to me that it all referred to the circumstances that I had found myself in at that time. I had encountered the Lord Jesus just like that Samaritan woman. He asked me to give Him a drink, "**da mihi bibere**". He wanted my heart, my devotion, my faith. And I, knowing Who He was, the One Who requested this of me, ought to go to Him for the water of His grace, His love, for He is the source of living water and whoever drinks the water that He gives, will have within himself a source bursting forth with everlasting life. "**Mulier, crede mihi**" – here it seemed to me that the Lord Jesus had told me that I ought to believe Him, no matter how extraordinary and incomprehensible were the things He had spoken of, that which He had requested of me." **Venit hora, et nunc est, quando veri adoratores adorabunt Patrem in spiritu et veritate. Nam et Pater tales quaerit, qui adorent eum. Spiritus est Deus**" – I understood that I ought to submit in spirit and in truth, as God demanded that I praise Him in spirit, though I had no proof for all that I had been told, for the things that had been revealed to me, seemingly unreal, impossible. And so, intuitively, following the Church, I applied the Gospel to myself (A,172-173).

So, as she herself would come to discern, apart from her spiritual director's help, the Gospel was her main point of reference, using contemporary images – a sort of GPS – on her path to sanctity. Frances Siedliska, as I have already mentioned, had her own, original way of reading the Gospel. She shared this gift with the sisters, not so much in the role of a lecturer - an exegete, but as their Mother and spiritual Mistress, someone who had something to say and confide, as she still has today... For the Gospel, in her spiritual experiences, changed from a book to be read into a book of life, from stories of the past into events that led to the "here and now", and thus offered an opportunity to synchronize her own life story with the life of Jesus of Nazareth.

Some well-known pericopes enchanted and took possession of Mother Mary's soul, such as: Jesus' encounter with the Samaritan woman, the story of Mary and Martha from Bethany, the Parables of the Kingdom, of the Good Shepherd, and St. John's teaching on mutual love. Frances' predilection for choosing Gospel texts according to her spiritual needs, were also expressed through other biblical texts – often quoted or commented on – particularly two Old Testament texts that were dear to her heart, the *Psalms* and *Song of Songs*. Blessed Frances' works leave no doubt; biblical references are fundamental and omnipresent in her writings.

Here we shall concentrate on an analysis of texts that have been selected mainly from Mother Mary's *Autobiography* and *Diary* (2 volumes), though we shall also refer to other sources, such as her *Letters* and *Conferences*, for they are part of the most valuable sources of the spirituality of the Sisters of Nazareth.

Subjects for Personal Meditation:

My first particular encounter with the Word of God

When and under what circumstances?

-What was the result?

-What has changed in my life since that encounter?

4. Experience of the Word of God in the Life of Blessed Frances Siedliska – the So-Called Mystagogical Function

Experience of the exceptional role of the Bible links Mother Mary with many mystics, in the sense of spiritual reading, as well as in reflecting the Word of God in her life. The testimonies of the first Sisters of Nazareth depict Blessed Mary of Jesus the Good Shepherd as a person who was “hungry and thirsty for God”, a person initiated into the knowledge of Divine mysteries, preoccupied with reading, mainly Holy Scripture, but also other ascetic and mystical books. That does not surprise us, considering her spiritual and intellectual predispositions, totally focused on coming to know God, the one Lord of her heart. Here is a fragment of M. Gabriel Lubowidzka’s valuable testimony:

Her contemplative soul, always in the deepest of unions with her Divine Beloved, drew extraordinary light directly from His Heart, strength, and that ardent love, with which she burned. I recall that (...) she often read St. Thomas’ Summa, particularly the chapters on grace... She had a natural intuition for the things of God; I would say that she had penetrated the mysteries of our holy religion with the greatest of ease. Fr. Semenenko, General of the Congregation of the Resurrection, often said that his greatest pleasure was in talking about the most elevated and subtlest theological subjects with our Mother, and that he admired her spirit and extraordinary perceptiveness, beautified by the fragrance of the most profound humility. She liked reading the works of: St. Francis de Sales, St. Alphonsus, St. Catherine of Siena, Blessed Angela of Foligno and St. Teresa. But Holy Scripture in particular was her daily reading, which she preferred most. She read Holy Scripture in Latin, and encouraged us to meditate on the Gospel, to draw light and spiritual life from it.⁴²

However, reading and meditating on Holy Scripture did not lead her to just an analysis or interpretation of particular biblical texts or concepts, but it became a real experience of them. Hence a text was not only more intelligible, but it was also a kind of reality, truly spiritual, but empirical. So one can speak of the Bible’s mystagogical function⁴³ in Frances Siedliska’s life. An example is her reflection of the 12th of January, 1885:

⁴² Cf. A. Ricciardi, *Frances Siedliska*, Rome 1970, p. 255.

⁴³ **Mystagogy** (Greek) μυσταγωγέω, μυσταγωγία – a religious concept meaning, initiation into mysteries – spiritual reality mystery. More on this subject: W. Zyzak, *Mystagogy*, in *Lexicon of Catholic Spirituality*, Lublin-Kraków 2002, pp. 527-530.

During a reflection on Father's teaching about the twelve-year-old Lord Jesus going to the Temple of Jerusalem [Lk 2: 46], and about His mission, I thought that the same Lord Jesus was in my heart, the One Who had fulfilled all this, accomplished all this, and because that which the Lord God does endures forever, this act of the Lord Jesus has not been lost, it is, it endures, and the Lord Jesus renews it in the human souls who follow Him in the mysteries of His life, who take them to heart, and in accord with the measure of the wretchedness proper to them, imitate their Lord and God.

I besought the Lord Jesus to be frequently present with me in this mystery of His, so that He might always lead me to God's Temple of Law, to the fulfilment of my obligations, to a collective life in everything with my sisters. But there, deep in the innermost recesses of my soul, in the temple that is inaccessible to anybody and imperceptible to human eyes – there, may my most merciful Lord deign to always hold his poor child, His poor creature, this lost sheep, but found by the merciful Shepherd [cf. Lk 15:4-6]; may my soul always be there with Him, and He always with me: "Manete in me et Ego in vobis" [Jn 15:4]; there – in those recesses of my soul – no one else but my Lord and I, His most poor handmaid, His most happy child, the slave of His most sweet Love! (Diary 2, 15).

So Blessed Mary had a good intuition; she understood that in reading and meditating on Holy Scripture we achieve our basic aim when we move from an experience of the inspired Book to experiencing a Person, when the presence of the Word of God, Jesus Christ, finally "emerges" from the words of the Bible. No doubt *this process, existential and hermetic, is a grace, a gift of the Holy Spirit, always possible on condition that we assimilate the Bible, starting with one's own existential experiences, and in continual contact with them.*⁴⁴ Those subtle spiritual experiences, the fruit of the Word, were a profound part of her life. And this greatly increases the value of her writings. These notes reveal, with extraordinary clarity, her spiritual wealth. One of the most significant aspects of this "abundance of grace" is the dynamic presence of the Word of God. One constantly senses it from the very first strokes of the pen, as we see on the title page of her *Autobiography: In charitate perpetua dilexi te ideo attraxi te miserans (Jer 31: 3).*⁴⁵ So Blessed Mary defined the story of her soul as: *the history of Divine Mercy upon a sinner – Jesus' work in her soul, written at the request of Fr. Lechert... (A, 1).*

Her outer and inner life was then transformed by the merciful love of God. Hence the only idea that was of value and of significance to her, just as it was for the prophet Jeremiah, was to lift up songs of the goodness and inexpressible compassion of God, Who is Love and Mercy.

Blessed Mary lived that mystery and contemplated its reality in the depths of her soul, in the light of biblical texts. The main aim and motivation of all her writings was to make this known. Hence it is not surprising that the biblical quotes and references in her works usually refer to this mystery. So the texts are not random texts, nor are they used for stylistic purposes, for they are not only consistent with the subject matter of her notes, but they also bear witness to Blessed Mary's profound reflections, and to a true, inner assimilation of the

⁴⁴ Cf. S. J. Baez Ortega, op. cit., p. 1.

⁴⁵ (Latin) *I have loved you with an everlasting love; therefore I have continued my faithfulness to you.*

Word of God. Moreover, they testify that the essence of the Sisters of Nazareth spirituality was crystallized through an intimate contact with the Word of God, Who is Love.

Subjects for personal reflection:

My personal “experiences” of biblical truths and events

- Which Holy Scripture texts are particularly dear to me? Why?
- Which of them allowed me to understand and experience the relevance and living presence of the Word of God in my life, the Church, in the contemporary world?

5. The Word of God as the Most Important Criterion in Reading and Interpreting Events in Blessed Frances Siedliska’s Life

Frances frequently turned to the Bible, as it revealed the truth, which is God Himself, and His plan of salvation. She wrote (April 27, 1895):

My Divine Master deigned to grant me yet other little rays of His Divine light. He roused me to abase myself, to annihilate myself before Him, for in being supreme Truth, He is surrounded by glory and He is well pleased when a creature recognises and acknowledges Truth in Him, giving worship and praise, which is due to Him, acknowledging in all simplicity that He is the Author of all good and all holiness... (Diary2, 360).

To her the Bible was the measure of supreme Truth, with which she always desired to confront the decisions and events of her own life. That which was characteristic in her experiences was the attempt to read and interpret her own life in its light. The word of God led her to the heart of trust and consolation. It was the living word, active; it illuminated the depths of her soul with truth and wisdom, and revealed Gods designs to it. It was a sanctifying word. A note testifies to this (June 1, 1884 - **Descent of the Holy Spirit**):

Yesterday’s Gospel reading from the fourteenth chapter of St. John, so marvellous, greatly moved me, for it speaks about life with the Lord Jesus: “you in me and I in you”, and of the Spirit of Truth, Who “will teach everything” [cf. Jn 14:15-20]. Reading this, I cried (Diary 1, 92)

Frances discovered numerous similarities between her spiritual and existential experiences and those in Holy Scripture. Her always hungry soul soaked up biblical texts, particularly the Gospel, in order to more profoundly understand them, and at times to look at them from a different perspective. That which emerges from her writings, with reference to the word of God, can be systematized in the following way:

A. EFFECTIVENESS OF THE WORD OF GOD

Many of Blessed Mother Mary’s reflections emphasize this characteristic. Here is an example from her *Diary* (16th of April, 1884):

Today's Gospel reading was about the Lord Jesus, when He stood at the edge of the Sea of Galilee; "Dominus est" [cf. Jn 21: 7]. The Lord gave me two feelings as to His most sweet presence in my soul. He deigned to so draw me toward Himself that at times I was totally occupied with Him. On the other hand, I saw all my ugliness and corruption. My perverse nature stirred and suggested various thoughts: that I was living an illusion; that it was satanic; that I was just deluding my confessor and myself. Knowing(...) what a struggle it was(...) I fled to the Lord, and whenever I revealed my wretchedness before Him the most merciful Lord always gave me peace in the depths of my soul, and the trust and the certainty that it was Him Himself, and that I must pass through such a purgation. At the same time, however, the Lord Jesus confirmed me in the conviction that I ought to lead a new life (...) with Him, not seeking anything – but Him (...). Hence my "I" disappeared from before my eyes, leaving only the Lord Jesus (Diary2, 14-15).

The nouns in this text point to the effects of the work of God's word in Mother May's soul: *peace, trust, purification, detachment, consolation...* For the words of St. John's Gospel are not only a message to one's mind, but primarily contents perceived by the heart, which then give strength, light and consolation; they lead into the "blood circulation" of God's plans.

B. ABILITY TO CONFRONT ONE'S OWN EXPERIENCES WITH THOSE DESCRIBED IN THE BIBLE

Frances Siedliska's spiritual notes give us beautiful examples of how to take advantage of Holy Scripture in daily life; how to confront our own experiences with biblical teaching. Here are several examples:

When Frances turned eighteen, her father, an energetic nobleman, planned to introduce her to the social life of the Warsaw salons. Already aware of what her vocation was to be, and, moreover, following the advice of her spiritual director, Fr. Leander, she resolved to tell her father that he would not compel her to "go into the world". She described this incident thus:

*(...) understanding the Lord Jesus' words in Fr. Leander's letter, that it is necessary to **cut off one's leg, pluck out one's eye** if they interfere in doing good, I decided, with God's grace, to give up everything, stop dance lessons, going to the theatre, and the like (...). Admittedly, God commanded us to listen to our parents, but not when it led to doom. (...). So it is better to cause them a momentary distress (...), and thus protect them and oneself from danger (A, 69-70).*

Frances' attitude, her radicalism, brings to mind what Jesus said to the young man: *If you would be perfect, go, sell what you possess and give to the poor, and you will have treasure in heaven; and come, follow me (Mt 19: 21)*. This call became her lifelong guideline.

From the first to the last letters of her spiritual notes, Frances appears as a person with a phenomenal "ear" for the voice of God. Aware of that gift, the ability to listen to the Word in profound silence, without questions and doubts, she expressed it repeatedly through biblical phrases drawn from the description of Our Lady's attitude:

My Divine Saviour did everything to increasingly draw my soul to Him. My confessor's letters made a great impression on me, they penetrated me to the depths and turned me towards God, and at the same time increasingly convinced me of Fr. Leander's supernatural spirit and of his contacts with the invisible world, while I felt happy when he wrote something about it to me. However, I did not dare to ask him

about anything myself. I just listened and kept everything in my heart [cf. Lk 2: 19-51]. Every time Father came I endeavoured to direct discussions to the things of God (A, 163).

For the listening attitude not only includes a perception of the content; the words that have been stored in the memory ought to “reach” the heart in order to be a point of reference for our feelings, plans and actions. The word ought to “enter” daily life from the heart, which in the Bible⁴⁶ symbolizes the whole of one’s inner being, one’s spiritual “core”: the intellect, reason, will, feelings, powers and abilities. This is a trait of Our Lady, described in St. Luke’s Gospel (cf. Lk 2: 19-51).⁴⁷

C. THE WORD OF GOD – SOURCE OF FAITH AND TRUTH

The word of God also became, to Blessed Mary, **an aid in strengthening her faith, and the criterion for infallible truth with reference to Holy Church.** She noted in her *Autobiography*:

*“The Papal Matter” was a book by Fr. Prokop, a Capuchin, that defended the pope’s secular authority and, if I am not mistaken, his infallibility. This issue engaged the minds of all at that time; the book was read, and it was given to me. However, the Lord Jesus gave me, through his grace, to clearly understand, but primarily a strong faith, that He, the most merciful Lord Jesus is with the Church, alive in it, and so **the gates of hell shall not prevail against it** [cf. Mt 16:18]. It seemed to me that since the Lord Jesus had said that, had so resolved, it would be improper for me to read people’s arguments and rely more on them than on His word. (A, 86-87).⁴⁸*

Strength in experiencing suffering through defamation.⁴⁹ In this case Holy Scripture not only brought her consolation, but it also helped her to discover the universal truth of the sinfulness of human kind, which strengthened her attitude of humility. This is well expressed in the young Frances’ reflection on being accused of a “tactless attitude” towards an institute in Lublin. She comments on this thus:

As to the institute in Lublin, as far as I recall, it did come to mind to ridicule it. I knew several people who were directed by Fr. Leander. I revered and respected them

⁴⁶ In the Bible, the **heart** has a special place. It symbolizes the essence of a human being, a place where decisions concerning God, faith and salvation are made, that is, that which is spiritual in man; finally, God’s abode, and a symbol of life. Man’s deeds arise from the heart, and wherein God’s law is engraved. The Bible speaks of the heart of creation – heart of the seas (for example, Ezek 27: 25-27), of the heart moving a man to act (1Sam 24: 5), finally, of God’s heart. And it points out that only God can open a heart, or give one a clean heart (cf. Ps 51: 10), in order to renew love.

⁴⁷ *Mary kept all these things, pondering them in her heart* [Lk 2: 19].

⁴⁸ Fr. Leander Lenzian commented on the young Frances’ attitude in a letter to his penitent Mrs. Aszperger thus: *Frances did not take “The Papal Matter”, reflecting in her soul: “What is human reasoning to me, of what use are people’s remarks and opinions to me, since the Lord Jesus told us that the gates of hell shall not overcome the Church. I pray for the Holy Father, and I shall continue to do so, and may the Lord Jesus do what He wills with the Holy Father”.* Frances’ attitude – continues Fr. Leander – *reminds me of St. Louis, the French king. When he was told that the Lord Jesus had appeared in the Blessed Host, he did not want to see the miracle, saying: “I firmly believe that the Lord Jesus is in the Most Holy Sacrament of the Altar” (A, 85).* Paraphrasing, one could say that by her attitude she expressed this truth: *“I firmly believe that the Lord Jesus is in the words of Holy Scripture”.*

⁴⁹ One of Fr. Leander’s penitents accused Frances of an alleged “thoughtless attitude”, an accusation that was totally unfounded and which was quickly refuted by her confessor.

*a lot as they were his penitents; so I thought that they must be holy. (...) It seems to me that I did not ridicule them, but I rather wanted to belong to their circle. Not as a nun, as I felt unworthy of that, but as a servant to, first of all, their superior, the blind Mary Wojewódzka, who, I had heard, was an extraordinary and very pious person. (...) perhaps I once said, laughing, that two new orders would arise: the Felician Sisters and from that work which Fr. Leander is involved in, but I do not recall any ridicule. But You, Lord, “**who triest the minds and hearts**” [Ps 7: 9], saw something within me that was not pleasing to Your eyes (A, 77).⁵⁰*

Another example, which also reveals Mother Mary’s very sensitive conscience, shows how the word of God **verified and formed her attitude of complete trust in Jesus**:

*(...) one day, during prayer, I became alarmed that my ardent requests for Fr. to remain in Rome, and that I had asked all the local sisters to pray for this, were against the complete trust that I should have in Jesus. When I was considering this, Jesus gave me to understand, or rather reminded me of a **passage from the Acts of the Apostles concerning St. Peter’s imprisonment, when the Apostles prayed day and night and had St. Peter released** [cf. Acts 12: 5-17]. That answer completely reassured me (Diary 2, 106-107).*

We shall add several examples from Mother Mary’s *Spiritual Diary* to the above examples as they reveal the exceptional influence of the Bible on her spiritual life, particularly in experiencing the night of faith.

D. THE WORD OF GOD – THE SOLE LIGHT DURING TRIALS OF FAITH

Here are a several examples which show that Frances constantly referred to Biblical texts, especially the Gospel, **during spiritual trials, at times of purgation**.

*O my Lord, I thank You for everything, for all You have done for me of late: for my interior death; for severing all my purely human ties; for my soul’s continual purification; for inwardly depriving me of everything, in order that You alone might be my Lord, my Father, my Beloved, my All.(...) so merciful, O Lord, for, out of love for my wretched soul, You so desire my heart for Yourself (...), You do not want it to flounder in human affections.(...). O Lord, deign to work within me and, despite my wretchedness, accomplish to Your glory that which You have commenced. **“To fear the Lord is the beginning of wisdom”** [Sir 1:14], fear – but divine fear, not human, not servile – but childlike fear; the fear of offending the Lord God. **Love of the Lord is the crown of wisdom** [cf. Sir 1:18], but (...) when it is not linked with fear and*

⁵⁰ Perhaps this concerned Mrs. Aszperger – Fr. Lenzian’s penitent, for as we read the young Frances’ words: *as I was later convinced, Mrs. Aszperger, very devoted to Fr. Leander, wrote to him about people whom she sometimes judged subjectively, and not according to the truth... (A, 76). I believed her, trusted her, and sometimes told her something about myself, whereas she understood things her own way and, as I learnt later, she wrote of her opinions about me to Fr. Leander, who at that time believed her totally. Hence I then suffered a lot, and later too, but may the Lord Jesus be praised for it all (A, 78). But someone else may have conveyed such an opinion, to which Fr. Leander’s letter to Mrs. Aszperger would seem to point, in which the confessor stresses: *A certain person has stung Frances in a letter, whose attitude greatly pleased me, as she accepted it in silence and resolved to keep quiet about it... (A, 85). So the information in her Autobiography does not resolve the issue, but it points to (which is very valuable to us!) the young Frances’ great spiritual maturity.**

mistrust of oneself – it can lead one far, very far astray... Hence one should always be afraid of oneself; fear oneself (Diary1, 3).⁵¹

The above reflections recall St. John of the Cross, who so eagerly realised the principle of “day and night” meditation on the Lord’s words, as well as persevering in prayer. God, unseen, is a challenge to us to reveal His presence. So it is the more necessary to be open to revelation, to listen intently to it, in order to allow the Word to take possession of one, and thus enter into a relationship of intimacy, trust and friendship with Him. Such is the process of purgation and gradual union, of which the living example is the crucified Christ. Frances, who experienced the same thing, declared the following on the commemoration day of another Carmelite saint, Teresa of Avila:

*I have not had such a difficult day for a long time – the day when we commemorate this saint who was so full of love for the Lord Jesus. I was as if dead, as if of ice, of stone – in utter abandonment, far from God. No other year have I prayed so much to St. Teresa as I did today. But it has never yet been so difficult for me. And the Lord occasioned that I could not get to confession for several days, which is my strength, my life. (...) . I could only groan in my interior suffering before the Lord and call: “**My God why hast Thou forsaken me?**” [Ps 22: 2; Mt 27:46; Mk 15:34]. But I was not united enough with the Lord Jesus; I had co-suffered with Him too little. The Lord Jesus is showing me that all that I have, I have of Him (Diary1, 249).*

So Blessed Mary’s share is the experience of the dying Christ’s suffering, and in that which ensued from such suffering; the attitude of negating everything in order to possess Everything. That is true wisdom, discovered in the Bible, and confronted with her own inner experiences. Elsewhere, she adds after Job:

***Yahweh gave, Yahweh has taken back. Blessed be the name of Yahweh (Job 1:21).** Yesterday, the Lord Jesus gave me consolations. Today, He took them away; pain, longing, sadness, doubt, fear and trepidation remain. He also permitted other vexations of soul and mind, yet this was of His infinite mercy and love, so as to purify my soul (Diary1, 50)*

2. Holy Scripture and the Development of Biblical Studies in Blessed Frances Siedliska’s Times

⁵¹ Blessed Mary continues her reflections on purity of heart. She meditates on Christ’s teaching: *Blessed are the pure in heart, for they shall see God [Mt 5: 8]. No one save the Lord Jesus can give one this purity; when He pleases, and the kind He pleases. One must rely on Him completely. The Lord God decides on the time, the day, the hour. One should not want to be a saint immediately, perfect, a seraphim – according to one’s own conception. However, one ought to know of one’s complete corruption, one’s wretchedness, one’s wickedness, and trust in the Lord Jesus so that He might cleanse one of it when He so pleases, and bear it humbly.(...). Now that this is clearer we need to be more vigilant and detest sin. We learn to commune inwardly with the Lord Jesus through having contact with Him over a longer period of time. It is impossible for a soul that frequently draws close to the Lord, by prayer and inner contact with Him, not to be purified, not to be ever more pure, more and more pervaded by the Lord Jesus. Prayer and mutual love is the life of Nazareth.*

From then on she finds answers to all her doubts in the Resurrected Christ, and the right road to Him – in the Gospel. She testifies to this on the Feast of the Ascension, 1884:

This precious Feast passed by with me suffering physically, and in some sort of moral torpidity. I sought the Lord Jesus, but I did not know whether to rejoice or to be sad, whether to rejoice in His glory, His triumph, or be sad because of His departure, though it shows us

where to seek Him, where our heart ought to be – where our Treasure is to be found, at God's right hand [cf. Mt 6:21; Lk 12:34] (*Diary I*, 74).

Subjects for personal reflection:

Blessed Mary interpreted events in the light of the Bible

- What is my experience of the power and effectiveness of the Word of God?
- Are the words of Holy Scripture of most importance to me: in making decisions, in difficult situations, in relations with others?

6. The Word of God as a Priority Reference and “Means” in Describing and Explaining Blessed Frances Siedliska’s Spiritual Experiences

Biblical terms, figures and symbols and their role in the writing of Blessed Mary of Jesus the Good Shepherd

To Frances Siedliska, the Bible was a special aid in describing and explaining spiritual experiences - seen as a new *history of the covenant and salvation* (cf. *Diary I*, 181) - that she experienced within her own soul. Apart from the constant desire to interpret events in the light of the Bible, that which is endearing in her is her total fascination and spiritual need to identify herself and her spiritual experiences with specific texts, figures, symbols or images from both the Old and New Testaments. It seems that her very profound, personal reading of Holy Scripture, especially the Gospels, and that which concerned Christ, seems to chart several original trends in her personal “exegesis”:

A. Blessed Mary constantly referred to *biblical figures* who vividly depicted various experiences and stages of spiritual life (for example, Mary Magdalene, the prodigal son, the

poor widow, and the like). The Bible is full of personal models which are “ascribed their appropriate functions” in the history of salvation, symbols of a given moment, a stage (and sometimes “crossroads”) of “redemptive events”. All the figures point to something: a spiritual direction or stage. Blessed Mary superbly sensed this biblical symbolism of figures and events. She knew that everybody could create a “micro- history” of salvation out of their own lives. Biblical heroes, referred to one after another in her writings, help us to understand the sense and process of spiritual dynamism, and her own gradual change. They, to our Mother Foundress, and also St. Teresa of Avila, became a part of biblical truth. Hence,

alongside numerous biblical quotes, paraphrases or allusions, they appear in her spiritual notes as *important examples of spiritual life*.

Blessed Mary referred to biblical events – the heroes of which were **WOMEN** – with a special liking, and, **on the whole, identified with them and their experiences**.

She had, as we recall, a particular affection for the **Samaritan woman** from her youth, and identified with her when she discerned her own vocation. Blessed Mary explained her intense feelings, evoked by the Gospel descriptions of this figure, in a moving, very detailed reflection. Let us return to it again:

*That day, for example, when Fr. Leander said that God had chosen me for great things(...), the Church reading was about the **Samaritan woman** (cf. Jn 4: 5-42), my beloved passage. It seemed to me that it all referred to the circumstances that I had found myself in at that time. I had met the Lord Jesus just like that Samaritan woman.*

*He asked me to give Him a drink, “**da mihi bibere**” – “**Give Me a drink**”; He wanted my heart, my devotion, my faith. And I, knowing Who He was, the One Who requested this of me, ought to go to Him for the water of His grace, His love, for He is the source of living water and whoever drinks the water that He gives will have within himself the source of everlasting life.*

Frances analyzed this beautiful periscope, word after word, sentence after sentence. Every word was to her a gift, and part of her personal dialogue with Jesus:

*“**Mulier, crede mihi**” – “**Believe Me woman**”, - here it seemed to me that the Lord Jesus had told me that I ought to believe Him, no matter how extraordinary and incomprehensible the things He spoke of, or that which He requested of me.*

*“**Venit hora, et nunc est, quando veri adoratores adorabunt Patrem in spiritu et veritate. Nam et Pater tales quaerit, qui adorent eum. Spiritus est Deus**” – “But the hour is coming, and now is, when the true worshipers will worship the Father in spirit and truth, for such the Father seeks to worship him. God is spirit, and those who worship him must worship in spirit and truth” [Jn 4: 23-24] - I understood that I ought to submit in spirit and in truth, as God demanded that I praise Him in spirit, though I had no proof for all that I had been told, for the things that had been revealed to me, seemingly unreal, impossible. And so, intuitively, following the Church, I applied the Gospel to myself (A, 172-173).*

Blessed Mary quoted this text in reference to herself, unaffectedly and assuredly, in order to interpret all the amazing events of her life, to make sense of them, to see their significance. She discerned her vocation, and then saw her new life in the light of the Gospel. And when the “boat” of her life sailed out, *in altum*, towards Merciful Love, deep into the Mystery of the Church, the Lord’s words constantly illuminated the course of her life and vocation ever more strongly, ever more penetratingly... Jesus’ words set her feet on the road

to truth, and warmed her heart to the point of craving for profounder prayer. Thus the Gospel image, “kept in the heart”, like Our Lady, “the encounter at the well”, was to Blessed Mary not only a kind of biblical typology, but a kind of summons, a model for her self-perfection in the religious life; a mutual completion of desire on the eternal waterfalls of the “Water of life”.

The Bible story about the Samaritan woman is so written that one might slowly discover and come to know the One Who is speaking; to increasingly admire Him. Christ revealed Himself to the Samaritan woman, and to Frances - as He will eventually reveal Himself to us - as the Lord, the One Who performed miracles (verse 15) as a prophet (verse 19), the expected Messiah (verses 25-26, 29). Christ’s extraordinary and gradual self-revelation in the Samaritan woman’s life, as well as Mother Mary’s, and their discernment of His Divine desires, is also realised in our lives.

If you knew the gift of God, and who it is that is saying to you, “Give me a drink,” you would have asked him, and he would have given you living water (Jn 4: 10). Jesus did not reveal the whole truth about Himself all at once. He allowed tension and admiration to grow in Blessed Mary and the Samaritan woman ... He allowed them to grow in the understanding of His words, so that they might take root in their hearts. *A reader grows in reading God’s word*, as Gregory the Great used to say. According to Fr. Wons, this truth expresses the mystery of the humility of the Word of God. If one is like a child in one’s perceptions, then the Word of God will speak to one as a child. When one comes to a certain maturity, It speaks to one “as to a mature person”. One has to humbly consent to the stage that one is at in encountering the Word. The Bible is simultaneously a book that reveals a person.

It reveals the truth about us, for *in actual fact I do not read the Word, but it reads me and my life...*⁵². The living water, which Jesus gives, is a source in the most intimate, deepest part of one’s soul; it permeates one completely, and becomes a life power within one. Those first life giving drops, received by the “Polish Samaritan”- Frances Siedliska - on the verge of her religious life, were transformed into a spring that “welled up” with limitless graces, and so assured her spiritual life of freshness and strength, as nothing and nobody could ever have exhausted it.⁵³

The Samaritan woman stood before Jesus in the full truth of her sinfulness, illuminated by His word, and revealed the story of her life to Him. Did not the young Frances do the same thing? It was only then that Jesus could lead her to the heart of events and important life decisions. But first she had to discern the truth about her deepest desires, and about her disordered needs. It was only in coming to know the truth and rejecting all that was superfluous, all that veiled Jesus’ Countenance, that she was able know Him more profoundly, to understand His thoughts and actions. Paradoxically, Jesus then demanded more. He said:

Believe Me, that is, trust me, rely on Me, and never cease believing... You are on the right road of faith...⁵⁴ Never cease, do not be afraid... That which appears to be beyond your

⁵² Cf. *A Reader Grows in Reading Holy Scripture. Marta Wielek Talks to Fr. Krzysztof Wons*, Letter 23 (2006) 10, 20-23.

⁵³ The springs of “living water” image can be found, for example, in *Is* 49: 10; 58: 11; *Jer* 31: 25; *Amos* 8: 11; *Ps* 107: 5.9.

⁵⁴ Cf. K. Wons, *Abide in Jesus. A Retreat with St. John*, Krakow 2007, p. 136.

strength will be effortless and fruitful with Me. Did Frances not sense this, writing in her *Autobiography*: “**Believe Me, woman,**”- here it seemed that Jesus was telling me that I ought to believe Him, though the things He was telling me about, and that which He required of me, were extraordinary and incomprehensible...

Having passed this stage of her spiritual path, the Samaritan woman then had to resolve the most important issue. Jesus spoke to her of a new form of worship, one that was not based on outer things... It was to worship God in *Spirit and truth*. Jesus is the temple in Whom one worships God the Father. Such a life is a gift from the Spirit of truth.⁵⁵ Outer forms of religiousness do not transform a person if they are not experienced in Spirit and in truth, in an intimate bond with God, at one with His desires.⁵⁶ This was a truth that must have penetrated deeply into Blessed Mary’s heart, since her own example, her teaching in conferences and letters, her vision of the Congregation’s life, expressed in her spiritual notes and in the Constitutions, emphasize a deep and true relationship with God and neighbour, rather than external regulations, which are but a reflection of that truth; the letter of the law...

This similarity to the Samaritan woman situates Blessed Mary in a class of similar women, and not only on account of the ability to listen and understand the Lord’s words. Jesus did not reveal Himself to the Samaritan woman on Mount Gerizim, nor in Jerusalem, but “in the very centre of her longing”.⁵⁷ He revealed Himself, and uncovered his real Countenance in the words: “**I Am** (Greek – Ego emi)⁵⁸, the One talking to you.” The Samaritan woman’s experience was much richer than she had expected. For the One before her was more than the Messiah. I. Gargano, a Camaldolese monk, commenting on this passage, notices that the Samaritan woman behaved, after those important words, “like a woman in love”, like the Beloved in the *Song of Songs*.⁵⁹ From then on Jesus was her “well”. That encounter was like her “wedding day”, when her deepest desires were fulfilled.⁶⁰ Did not a similar thing happen to Frances? Immediately after analyzing Jesus’ encounter with the Samaritan woman, which she referred – verse after verse – to her own situation, Frances noted in her *Autobiography*:

In my notes of March the 21st [1873] I read: ⁶¹(...). Fr. Leander blessed the dress I was wearing and told me to consider it as a religious dress and myself as the Lord

⁵⁵ Ibid.

⁵⁶ Cf. K. Romaniuk, A. Jankowski, L. Stachowiak, *A Practical Commentary on the New Testament*, vols I-II, Pallottinum, Poznań 1999, p. 445.

⁵⁷ Cf. K. Wons, *Abide in Jesus...*, op. cit., p. 137.

⁵⁸ “I Am” reveals Adonai Himself to the Samaritan woman: “I AM WHO I AM” (*Ex* 3: 14).

⁵⁹ Cf. K. Wons, *Abide in Jesus...*, op. cit., p. 138.

⁶⁰ The story of the Samaritan woman is like a palimpsest superimposed on Old Testament stories of “encounters at a well”. There are at least three similar events in the Old Testament. The first speaks of the aged Abraham sending a servant to his homeland to bring a wife for his son Isaac (*Gen* 24). She is Rebekah, whom the servant encountered at a well. The second encounter “at a well” concerns the story of Jacob, the son of Rebekah, and Rachel, the daughter of Laban (*Gen* 29: 1-14). The third story relates Moses’ flight from Egypt to the land of Midian and his encounter with the seven daughters of the priest Reuel (*Ex* 2: 15-22). Each of these stories is structured like St. John’s text (cf. *Jn* 4: 1-26): a hero’s journey to a foreign land, an encounter at a well, where he meets a woman and a talk entails, and the thirsty traveller asks for water, and so on. All the “encounters at a well” led to a marriage: Rebekah becomes Isaac’s wife, Rachel, Jacob’s wife, and Zipporah, Moses’ wife. So these events had a spousal dimension.

⁶¹ So this passage is not a dispassionate analysis of events, from a perspective of years, but a vivid testimony of her spiritual experiences, written down as they arose.

Jesus' and Our Lady's nun. What a joy that was, my Lord, I cannot express it, what bliss! I did not know what was happening to me. Everything disappeared before my eyes. I was only concerned with this, lived this. It seemed to me that the whole of heaven had come close to me, that I was amongst the angels and saints! For they too were my only confidants, they saw everything, I talked to them, expressed my happiness to them (A, 173-174).

In looking at the Samaritan woman's reaction, one might imagine that she did not walk to the town - but ran... She wanted to share her happiness with others. From that moment on Frances' spiritual life also gained an extraordinary impetus. She overcame her physical weaknesses (problems with her legs, which did not allow her to get about), accepted God's will, communicated to her by Fr. Leander, took her religious vows and prepared for her mission as the founder of a new religious family...

From then on it seems she told people what the woman from Samaria had said: "Go and see..." She invites us in a special way to experience an encounter with the Beloved, with the One Who desires to share an inexhaustible source with us: an intimate bond of love with the Father, in Spirit and in truth. The power of her testimony, passed on to generations of Sisters of Nazareth, lies in her personal experiences and extraordinarily dynamic faith, which had its beginnings "at the well" of living water. To Mother Mary, the Samaritan woman was a model in experiencing faith as a personal, loving encounter with God.

In contrast to the Old Testament protagonists: Rebecca, Rachael or Sephora, the Samaritan woman came across the Lord at high noon, that is, at 6:00 p.m., when "all was finished" (cf. *Jn* 19: 30). She found Him tired after a journey, thirsty... The thirst recalls His Passion, when blood and water flowed from His side... Frances also discovered this Countenance of the Beloved, first by the waters of the Pilica - the Good Shepherd from the Mazowian meadows, laying down His life for His sheep... Later, by the waters of another river - the Tiber - she matured in a loving dialogue, until she understood that He felt an unimaginably greater thirst. And that her response to the gift of water, that is, love, which matured in Spirit and in truth, was a passage (as in St. John's Gospel) to the real food, that is, doing the will of God. Such was the birth of the Sisters' of Nazareth FIAT, at the well of the open Heart of Jesus...

In the same notes of the first day of spring, 1873, we read:

On the feast of the Annunciation, Fr. told me that Our Lady had chosen me for a daughter, that the Lord Jesus had called me to great things, and that He would give me special graces for the new vocation. The Gospel reading for the day was: "Quia non erit impossibile apud Deum omne verbum... Ecce, ancilla Domini: fiat mihi secundum verbum Tuum."⁶² So I thought that I too was to believe, give myself up for anything, and be a most humble servant of God (A, 174).

Mary of Nazareth and the **Beloved** of the *Song of Songs* are undoubtedly the most important biblical figures in Blessed Mary's writings. We shall return to them later to more fully show other characteristic features of the spirituality of the Sisters of Nazareth.

⁶² (Latin) "For with God nothing will be impossible." (...) "Behold, I am the handmaid of the Lord; let it be to me according to your word" (*Lk* 1: 37-38).

Mary Magdalene, a harlot, who later faithfully followed Christ even unto the Cross and Resurrection, was one of Frances' favourite figures. Frances often referred to Mary Magdalene to express her own radical transformation, as she saw in her the process of her own coming to the fullness of love in Christ (Blessed Mary was particularly sensitive to the least negligence in her own attitude), and to encourage others to completely entrust their lives to Christ.⁶³ Blessed Mary also found an example of Mary Magdalene's trust in the teaching of Fr. Lechert, which she scrupulously noted in her *Diary*. However, Mary Magdalene was a frequent "guest" in her personal reflections and meditations.

*I have been thinking about this dear saint since yesterday, of how she sat at the Lord Jesus' feet and bathed them in her tears and covered them with her kisses. But I, most miserable, most wretched, I, who have sinned a thousand times more than this holy penitent, do not love as she loved – I nestled up to the Lord Jesus' feet so that I might receive grace and forgiveness. Father said Mass. (...) he spoke of St. Mary Magdalene. What a marvellous story. The Pharisees were scandalised that she had come to the Lord Jesus and that He had allowed her to be at His feet. What a marvellous example the Lord Jesus gave the Pharisees, for who loves more, the one who is forgiven much or the one who is forgiven less? In the words of the Lord Jesus: **"Her sins, many as they are, have been forgiven her, because she has shown such great love"** (Lk 7: 47). St. Mary Magdalene, once she had been converted, did not forsake the Lord Jesus, she did not doubt Him. When, after His resurrection, the Lord Jesus did not allow her, who had sought Him so urgently, to touch His feet: *Noli me tangere* (Jn 20: 7) – she did not worry, she did not think that the Lord had rejected her, for she loved Him, trusted Him and believed in Him; she was at peace, for she had put all her trust in Him (Diary I, 172-173).*

So Blessed Mary focused her meditation on St. Luke's relation of Jesus' stay at a certain Pharisee's house - Simon's (Lk 7: 37-38). Dinner was proceeding peacefully, when an unexpected guest suddenly appeared – a woman known for her disreputable profession. Though she is not named in Blessed Mary's reflections (as too in Christian tradition) she is identified as Mary Magdalene. Blessed Mary expresses sincere admiration for Jesus' answer (in the form of a parable) to the host, who was outraged by the situation. Jesus knew her heart, and so defended her. To Frances, she – in putting complete trust in Jesus – was also able to love Him above all else. It was a trust and love that overcame all fear about herself. This woman not only "risked her whole reputation"⁶⁴, but actually "diced with death".⁶⁵ So she was capable of great, pure love... And fidelity, as Blessed Mary notes: *she never deserted Him, never doubted in Him...*

Blessed Mary sometimes identified with Mary Magdalene without naming her. Here is an example; one of interest in that it names two women, symbols of exceptional love for the Lord, both dear to Frances, but the great sensitivity and profound humility point to Mary Magdalene, not Mary of Bethany. Let us note that the whole of the reflection is based on recalling the difficult time of the beginnings of the foundation in Rome, when - like the

⁶³ Conscious of her own sinfulness - common to all men - Blessed Mary sees in her an image of a person freed from the fetters of sin by the merciful Lord. In her, she sees a reflection of herself.

⁶⁴ She drew the revellers' contemptuous looks upon herself, malicious remarks, humiliation... This subject has been developed by E. Bosetti, *And He Interpreted the Scriptures to Them. Commentary on the Gospel According to St. Luke*, Kraków 2009, pp. 255-258.

⁶⁵ *Ibid.*

biblical hero – she felt *distraught and pained, spiritually deserted by all, and in that night of the spirit she received the gift of one of the greatest of graces* (Diary 1, 273):

(November 30, 1884) **First Sunday of Advent.** *The anniversary of one of the greatest graces that the Lord God of His mercy has granted me; the grace that was the beginning of a series of God's other gifts and graces. This grace was my very first confession before Father a year ago (...) when in despair, in pain, spiritually abandoned by all, I did not know where to go, I had lost my way – the road the Lord God from time immemorial had marked out for me and wanted to lead me along, but could not, for my wickedness and Satan's malice had tied His hands. (...). In the afternoon I made my way to St. John's Basilica where there was exposition of the Blessed Sacrament. There, I experienced a moment of relief, though Satan racked my soul terribly at prayer. However, faith in the Lord Jesus' presence in the Blessed Sacrament strengthened me and soothed all my wounds. I was at the Lord's feet, like the **Gospel Mary** [cf. Lk 10:39]. At times I did not even dare to be like her, so I was like the **harlot** who awaited her sentence [cf. Jn 8: 1-11]. It seemed to me that Mary's place was too bold for me, that I should keep at a distance from Him* (Diary1, 273).

It is so in the case of another female Gospel figure, for whom Blessed Mary had a great deal of affection, namely, the **Phoenician woman**.⁶⁶ We find three references to the woman's heroic faith in Blessed Mary's *Diary*, without her "name" being mentioned, or rather her descent. Frances focuses on the trusting attitude of this foreigner, and mentions each time the significant *image of crumbs falling off the table* of the Lord (cf. *Mk 7: 24-30; Mt 15: 21-28*).⁶⁷ Blessed Mary wrote down the first reflection on this subject on the 12th of June, 1884 (Corpus Christi):

Since this morning, in my wretchedness and stupidity, I thought that the Lord Jesus would deign to grant me a lot of sweetnesses today, consolations of love, as it is the Feast day of His love, His Blessed Sacrament. But it was otherwise. The Lord wanted to teach His poor, wretched creature that if I possess anything at all, then it is

⁶⁶ The woman, on hearing about Jesus' deeds, wanted Him to heal her daughter (*Mk 7: 26*). The term "Syrophoenician" indicates that she came from Phoenicia, in the Roman province of Syria, more exactly, the region between Tyre and Sidon. In a parallel fragment (*Mt 15: 22*) she is called a "Canaanite woman", this is a reference to an ancient geographical definition which probably referred to this region.

⁶⁷ *Mk 7: 24-30: And from there he arose and went away to the region of Tyre and Sidon. And he entered a house, and would not have any one know it; yet he could not be hid. But immediately a woman, whose little daughter was possessed by an unclean spirit, heard of him, and came and fell down at his feet. Now the woman was a Greek, a Syrophoenician by birth. And she begged him to cast the demon out of her daughter. And he said to her, "Let the children first be fed, for it is not right to take the children's bread and throw it to the dogs." But she answered him, "Yes, Lord; yet even the dogs under the table eat the children's crumbs." And he said to her, "For this saying you may go your way; the demon has left your daughter." And she went home, and found the child lying in bed, and the demon gone; Mt 15: 21-28: And Jesus went away from there and withdrew to the district of Tyre and Sidon. And behold, a Canaanite woman from that region came out and cried, "Have mercy on me, O Lord, Son of David: my daughter is severely possessed by a demon." But he did not answer her a word. And his disciples came and begged him, saying, "Send her away, for she is crying after us." He answered, "I was sent only to the lost sheep of the house of Israel." But she came and knelt before him, saying, "Lord, help me." And he answered, "It is not fair to take the children's bread and throw it to the dogs." She said, "Yes, Lord, yet even the dogs eat the crumbs that fall from their master's table." Then Jesus answered her, "O woman, great is your faith! Be it done for you as you desire." And her daughter was healed instantly.*

*from Him, and that He gives when He so pleases. I have no right to anything at all. Therefore, like a beggar, I ought to wait until it pleases the Lord to **throw me a crumb from His table** (Diary 1, 111).*

On the 8th of September of that year, the Feast of the Birth of the Virgin Mary, she wrote:

*I ought to throw myself – unconditionally – into the abyss of God’s Mercy. I should not have any claims to consolations, to the sweetness of an extraordinary contact with the Lord God; even abandon this, but implore and **settle for crumbs that might fall from the tables of servants faithful to the Lord Jesus** (Diary 1, 239).*

Fifteen years later, January, 1899, when in Paris, she described – using the same image – her spiritual experience during prayer before the Blessed Sacrament at the Church of the Most Sacred Heart of Jesus, in Montmartre:

*You deigned to so strongly draw my heart to Yourself, and so enkindled it with Your love, that – it seemed to me – some sort of power as if came out of the monstrance where You, O my Lord, are dwelling, and drew me to You; You granted me, Lord, the certainty (I cannot express how much the soul felt it) that You give Yourself to [my soul], that You communicate Yourself to it, that You give Your love, Your power, Your life, Your holiness (I do not know if it is befitting to so express it) – as if the properties of Your Divine Essence. Who can grasp this? Or express what happens in a soul when You dwell in it, when You communicate Yourself to it, when You commune with it (...)? It seems to me, or rather I trust in Your incomprehensible and infinite mercy, that I am in possession of You; that You are within me, and I in You. But if that were not so, Lord, then, through Your grace, I would always aspire to it, request it of You, and implore You to have pity on me and give though a whit, **a crumb from Your table**, though a spark of Your love to this soul which desires You, craves for You (Diary 2, 379)..*

It is necessary to note that all three passages refer to a contemplation by Blessed Mary; on the one hand, nostalgia, replete with love, for the presence of the Divine Beloved, while on the other hand, a humble trust that only He – the Lord of human hearts – could grant such a favour, in any way He might wish, at the most appropriate time... Such is the attitude of the humble Phoenician woman. The bread (life) of the Son is the disinterested love of the Father. The bread of God’s children is the Son, Who gives us His life, the presence of the redeeming God.

It is interesting that in the St. Mark’s Gospel Jesus was called “Lord” for the first and only time.⁶⁸ Blessed Mary, too, in her reflections, refers to Jesus as Lord (twice). The pagan woman *came and fell down at his feet*... It was a gesture of adoration. Frances did the same thing, deep in contemplation before the Blessed Sacrament. In a certain way the Phoenician woman, presented to us as a model of faith, “complements” the attitude of “the woman suffering from a hemorrhage”. The Jewish woman touched the passing Jesus, whilst the pagan woman was granted a miracle at a distance... Blessed Mary adored the Blessed Sacrament; it was not the Eucharist, she did not consume the Bread of Life, but begged for a morsel of the mystical presence of the Beloved... So her attitude of faith reminds us of the Phoenician

⁶⁸ Cf. *Mk* 5: 19; 11: 3, where He so describes Himself.

woman.⁶⁹ Jesus, in admiration, said to her: *O woman, great is your faith!* (Mt 15: 28).⁷⁰ This is an anticipation of that which will occur in the post-Passover Church; the word – the seed will bear fruit in the word-bread, which, through faith, is life and salvation for all...

Blessed Mary also had an intimate friendship with the two sisters from Bethany, **Martha and Mary**, who, in Church tradition, represent two groups of people: one devoted to contemplation, the other to the service of one's neighbour. Mary, of course, is a model of contemplation, intent on the Lord's words, while Martha is a master of a servant's attitude. Blessed Mary wrote in her *Diary*:

Evening. When I came to the Lord Jesus I felt His most holy voice in my soul, that, when Father [Lechert] is with us (when I have the good fortune to talk to Father), I ought to consider that I am with the Lord Jesus Himself, like Mary who listened to His teaching [cf. Lk 10: 39], and that, in serving Father, be aware that I am serving the Lord Jesus in the person of Father. (...). The awareness of the love with which He deigned to seek me, which led me to Him after so many years, overcame me with love for my Lord, with gratitude towards Him, and it gave rise to the desire to give myself to Him more fervently, and to follow Him more faithfully (Diary 1, 180).

The female heroes of the hospitable home in Bethany encountered Jesus, the Word made Flesh, in their own way; Mary, by reflecting on, contemplating the Master's teaching, Martha – by loving service. Blessed Mary superimposed this scene, like a valuable tapestry, on the realities of her own life. She endeavoured to be patient and attentive, like Mary, as well as full of simplicity and hospitality, like the hard-pressed Martha; all for Jesus, Who, in the person of an exceptional priest, came to her and the Sisters of Nazareth with help...

Frances Siedliska often recalls them in her *Diary*, but with a preference for Mary's attitude, identifying with her in various situations. For example, that *abiding at the Lord's feet*, a Christian symbol of contemplation, appears like a refrain in Blessed Mary's notes.

It may surprise one that St. Teresa of Avila, a reformer, but actually the founder of cloistered Carmelites, most highly recommended the bustling Martha's attitude to her nuns. It seems that both foundresses did that so as to assure a certain balance between contemplation and the active life in their religious orders. Where there is a more contemplative rhythm, it is necessary to underline the love of God and neighbour in deeds, whilst in the Sisters of Nazareth order, open to missionary work, there must be a constant turning to contemplative roots, which invigorates all other activities.

The same home, full of love and hospitality, the same family, roots, yet the paths of the Gospel sisters to Christ were very different... Each of them encountered the Word in a unique way, the sole one in a given convent. Let Nazareth be such a home, where – like Blessed Mary once did – those two beautiful servants of Christ teach us to be open to the truth of His word. For our experience of daily life is as the fathoming of His word... And vice versa, the reading of the Word, like our daily life.

⁶⁹ The woman believed that only a morsel of the bread was sufficient to feed all the dogs (pagans) and free her daughter from the evil spirit. She had faith in the One Who opened His arms and Heart, Who could satisfy the hunger of every living being (cf. Ps 104: 28; 145: 16; cf. Lk 12: 24).

⁷⁰ In *St. Mark's Gospel* it is the only miracle that Jesus performs without being "physically" present beside a healed (spiritually) person. He performs the miracle through the power of the "word" of the one who understands and receives the "Bread"; in this case the Phoenician woman.

Let Blessed Mary's reflection on this subject be a synthesis, wherein she sums up the fruits of her personal reading and meditation on the Gospel in her contemplative "following of the Lord's trusting pupils" during the Easter Octave, 1895:

*When I followed You, drawn by Your grace and the infinite mercy of Your passion, You deigned to occasion that I felt the triumph of Your Resurrection in my soul. What a consolation – to be able to contemplate You, after (by Your grace) meditating on Your passion, death and burial, triumphing over sin, death and hell, and also consoling – at Your various manifestations – **Your Most Holy Mother, Your faithful devotee, Mary Magdalene, as well as other holy women.** My Lord, by Your grace, I followed the Gospel which Holy Church reads during the octave of Your Resurrection; while You deigned to move me deeply by each of Your appearances. It seemed to me that I was there, that it all happened in my presence. Your Divine Body, resplendent in light, but above all Your Divine Wounds, glorious, witnessing to Your love, were often present to my soul's eyes, particularly during my prayers and adorations. You occasioned that I drew life from the holy spring of Your Feet's Divine Wounds – there I stayed, (thanks to Your grace), close, drawn by the bonds of Your love (Diary 2, 358-359).*

Blessed Mary often recalls biblical figures **to express her spiritual state.**

In her *Diary* we find two references to the **Prodigal Son** in reflections that express her remorse, and her thanksgiving to the Crucified Lord. It is interesting that in both cases Blessed Mary refers to the hero of the parable in order to express her feelings after having been to confession. She noted (April 26, 1884):

*After a conversation with Fr. Anthony, who confirmed that I ought to make this confession to the glory of the Lord Jesus and for the fulfillment of His will, I, by the Lord's grace, accused myself once again, I once again confessed my sins, disapproved of them, and I was filled with disgust by them. **I again stood before the Lord like the prodigal son,** totally deprived, vile, a dreadfully wretched soul; and I again saw what the Lord Jesus had done for me. I saw that my sins were the cause of His passion and death. The Lord Jesus deprived me of all affection, of sweetness and consolation, and gave me humiliation, silence, and that most profound feeling of what I am when I see my wretchedness in His presence. The Lord Jesus forgave me, pardoned me. Today it is necessary to make amends to Him for my sins, by love, by giving myself to Him, but first and foremost, by loving Him; for the one who loves much will be forgiven much (cf. Lk 7:47). The Lord, on the Cross, pardons and shows mercy (Diary 1, 36).*

The other reflection, in which Frances identifies with this biblical figure, is of the 8th of September of that year, but it concerns events that occurred five years earlier (1879). It is about her "whole life" confession, which to her was an experience that was comparable to that which the converted prodigal son had experienced in the merciful arms of his Father:

***Feast of the Birth of the Blessed Virgin Mary.**(...). It is a doubly happy day for me, for today, in Lyons, in 1879, after several days of work, as I had made a confession of my whole life, after absolution, after having identified everything – where I was, what my position was – I went to Holy Communion. That was a new encounter with the Lord Jesus – like the meeting of the prodigal son with his father. On the one hand, the son's wretchedness and impoverishment, his remorse and grief, on the other, his father's mercy, goodness, magnanimity, forgiveness (Diary 1, 238-239).*

In this same range of experiences we have a reference to **Paul of Tarsus** on his way to Damascus. Frances uses this well-known and extremely expressive image of Paul the Pharisee's spiritual transformation to express the grace of coming to know the love of God that she herself had received:

*The Lord Jesus granted me the grace to go to confession, during which I received more light through Father's words. The next day (...) a most painful mystery – the mystery of sin. And I entered into this mystery with the Lord Jesus, with His love, but later, horrified by the enormity of my sin, the enormity of my lovelessness (in comparison to the Love I came to know yesterday), I looked intently at this – perhaps calmly – but in great pain. I cried a lot, wept, and all my sins stood before my eyes. I was crestfallen, utterly crestfallen – from the very first day **I had the feeling that I was like Saul riding** (...). For I fell, dazzled by the marvellous sight of God's love. This divine love as if by its greatness threw me to the ground – overwhelmed me. Today, the sight of my sins did this to me. And indeed, crushed, half alive, I lay on the ground in pain and remorse (Diary 1, 271).*

So the grace of a mystical knowledge of God's unreserved love is connected with, in Blessed Mary's experience – as in the experience of the Apostle of Nations – a stronger (in the light of the Lord's presence) sense of one's own sinfulness... But only that? A complete change in Paul's image of God occurred near Damascus – he discovered His new Face. From that moment on, Christ was the sense of Paul's life. From then on the Apostle did all he could to bring others to "...know the love of Christ which surpasses knowledge" in order to be filled with all the fullness of God (Eph 3: 19).

In the same Letter, Paul, in a religious rapture, professes: *God and Father (...) who has blessed us (...) with every spiritual blessing (...) chose us before the foundation of the world (...); in love he destined us to be his sons...* (cf. Eph 1: 3-5). These words enrich the image of a loving God by a new view of man, who within the renewed relations with God becomes an "adopted son", a child of God, who lives "for the praise of his glory" (cf. Eph 1:12). This means that our loving God awaits man's love (cf. Eph 3: 17). Further issues in this work will allow us to say that Blessed Mary also discovered this Pauline truth in the light of God's word.

Lazarus of Bethany is undoubtedly another figure that Frances Siedliska refers to. But Blessed Mary, despite her affection for that faithful friend of Jesus, wanting to express a sense of spiritual death, arising from an awareness of her own sinfulness, portrays him with the aid of the image of "Lazarus laid in a tomb":

*So today, O my Lord, of Your grace and mercy, I began a retreat. You know, Lord, in what state I came to You: perhaps – as never before – hard, arid, inwardly abandoned, wretched, miserable, deprived of everything, full of malice, passions and darkness. I have never yet stood before You in such circumstances, in such an abyss of my wretchedness, particularly during a retreat. O Lord, like **Lazarus** I lay in a grave of sins; dead in soul, in need of being raised to a new life. My Lord, You Yourself, You alone can raise me to a new life (Diary 2, 244).*

Here too we can see a certain method, a process of forming that figure – so profoundly symbolic. Lazarus, laid in a tomb, expresses, as I mentioned, Frances' state of spiritual death. However, having experienced this night of the spirit, Blessed Mary knew that he would be restored to life by the power of Christ's love and mercy... She too, after having received grace during a retreat, experienced a "new life". Blessed Mary notes (June, 1899):

... together with the sisters, we had a holy retreat. The Lord Jesus enlivened me, **like Lazarus, laid in a tomb**; a new life entered my soul. Our Lord gave me a strange power and wonderful help to live the common life in everything. It was His grace, His goodness and mercy! (Diary 2, 392).

At times Blessed Mary compared herself to a **whole group of people who were characterised by a particular attitude, a particular behaviour**. During Holy Week, 1886, she notes:

*My will felt an inexpressible languor to good, but a capacity for all evil. I felt capable and ready – had not the Lord stopped me – to **betray Him, like Judas; abandon Him like the Apostles; deny Him, like Peter; [and even] to crucify Him, like the Jews**. I felt every possible evil in myself, and a great languor in regard to prayer and to pious exercises. The only grace the Lord God deigned to grant me was that, inasmuch as I could, I sincerely confessed everything and listened (inasmuch as it was possible in my wretchedness) to Father's holy advice. These terrible battles, struggles and temptations lasted for a long time. On Easter Wednesday, my Lord also permitted all this suffering to increase, especially during confession. (...). Though I suffered greatly at confession, after it my soul stilled a little. The Lord Jesus gave a moment of [calm] prayer. Father persistently pointed to the Lord Jesus, to constant self-abasement before Him, and told me to stand under the Lord Jesus' Cross **with Our Blessed Lady, St. Magdalene and St. John** (Diary 2, 160).*

Blessed Mary's description of her inner struggle during Holy Week was splendidly formed by comparing two groups of Gospel figures of diametrically opposed attitudes in regard to Jesus. The first group embraced those that had betrayed the Lord, the second – faithful and devoted to Him to the end.

Another reflection – an unfaithful group – served Blessed Mary to describe, on the one hand, the young Foundress' difficulties as regards her relations with some sisters, whilst on the other hand, it allows us to suspect that Frances understood her status as a servant of the suffering Christ perfectly well, of having to become a reflection of His attitudes, His decisions, His feelings, and therefore to love Him in the sisters:

*And I again felt fear and dread of facing several sisters. And here the most merciful Lord Jesus deigned to show me inwardly how He, our one Saviour, though He knew everything, [for] He read human hearts and knew that **Judas would betray Him, that Peter would deny Him, that the Jews would crucify Him**, did not, however, take heed of all that, that He was not disheartened, that He did not withdraw; indeed, He had the greatest of love for them, and He showed it to them. He showered them with favours to the last, though He knew how they would repay Him. O my Lord, I implore You, give me such love for You, fervent, sincere, true, so that I might look upon nothing but You; so that I might see You everywhere, in every person, so that I might love You... (Diary 2, 196).*

Frances saw her life as a journey with God, as a micro-history of redemption. Hence, when describing her relationship with Fr. Lechert, her spiritual director, she thrice depicts her life with the aid of a biblical image of a journey – **Tobias, safely led by Raphael, the Archangel**:

*The Lord Jesus mercifully permitted me to confess, and Father, given me from God, **like Raphael the Archangel given to Tobias** (cf. Tb 5: 5), consoles me at every step and leads me to the Lord! (Diary1, 24).*

This Biblical image appears again in the description of the Sisters of Nazareth first journey to America. Here the role of a spiritual father is considered in reference to the whole community of the Nazareth “missionaries”:

*So we departed in the evening at 10:30. I committed my sisters to my Lord Jesus. (...). As **the Archangel Raphael led the young Tobias** [cf. Tb 5:4 and the following verse], **so Father led us, too, so young, still weak and incompetent in the service and love of the Lord Jesus, guarded, and protected us, and always pointed to Our Lord and Saviour** (Diary 2, 70).*

Blessed Mary thrice experienced spiritual care to the measure described in Tobias,⁷¹ thanks to the ministrations of a young Resurrectionist Father, not indeed named, but described as “a pupil and spiritual child of our Father [Antoni Lechert]”. Of this “just ordained” priest, she writes: *In him Jesus has given me His guardian and guard; **as in him Tobias gave me the Archangel Raphael, who directs me...*** (Diary 2, 200). Such frequent references testify to the fact that Blessed Mary had read that Book, and knew it well enough to affectionately identify with the young Tobias in her trust in God, in his sense of God’s care and providence for the young Tobias.

She describes the great role of her spiritual director Fr. Antoni Lechert in spiritually leading her and the young Congregation, comparing him to **Moses**:

- **Spiritual leader** – (today we would say – *animator*) of Israel. Blessed Mary notes (14th of August, 1884 – the eve of the Assumption): *Today was a dear and festive day for Nazareth, for it was the anniversary of Father’s ordination. The Lord Jesus gave him to us, to show us God’s will and to guide this work along God’s road. He was ordained by His Excellency Cardinal M. Ledochowski at Gniezno, in 1870. O my Lord, You even then predestined this priest for Your Nazareth. You chose him to deliver Your work from the bondage of sin and the spirit of darkness, **like Moses Your people Israel, and bring it to the Promised Land – where the Lord Jesus rules, where His grace is the life of the soul, where the only aspiration and end is love and union with Him** (Diary1, 206).*
- **Moses – legislator and conveyor of God’s will** – (also in the context of working out the Congregation’s Constitution). She writes (November 19, 1884):

*Hitherto, I had thought of Father as God’s instrument, thanks to which the Lord’s infinite mercy delivered me from the abyss of hell, and indicated the straight road to God and led me along it. Today, I see Father as the one who **gives us the law, God’s Commandments, like Moses gave them to the Israelis, and he thus***

⁷¹ The *Book of Tobias* is the seventeenth book of the Catholic canon of the Old Testament. It is one of the Deuterocanonical books (Protestants see it as one of the Apocryphal books). It is not in the Hebrew Bible – rejected, as it was not written in Hebrew (probably in Aramaic, though a manuscript in Hebrew, in accord with the common Greek translation, has been found in Qumran). An anonymous author wrote it at the turn of the IIIrd and IInd centuries BC. It speaks about the ordeals of life in the Diaspora. It is a story (novella) about the fate of a pious and merciful Tobias from the tribe of Naph’tali and his family who were deported to Mesopotamia by the Assyrians living in Nineveh during the reign of Sennach’erib (705-681 BC). It speaks of Tobias’ deeds of mercy, who, despite the ruler’s ban, buried those that had been murdered, of the loss of his sight and in consequence his fortune. It also speaks of the fate of his son (also Tobias), on his way to Media to collect a debt in the company of the Archangel Raphael, who frees Sarah, Tobias’ wife, from the demon Asmodeus and indicates a treatment for his father’s blindness. The book ends with Tobias’ hymn of thanksgiving.

becomes God's messenger, the voice of God's thoughts, pointing to God's will for all this work, and for the Congregation – now and for the future (Diary 1, 265).

Another Old Testament figure – **Pharaoh**, in contrast to Moses, appears in Frances' *Diary* as a symbol of power, and a symbol of those who are obstacles on her spiritual path. As an example, I shall quote a longer but moving reflection by the Foundress. It delights us with its wealth of Biblical symbols, used by Mother Mary to describe her own spiritual path, depicted via an image of liberation - the Exodus of the chosen nation from Egypt:

*Today Father compared my life, and everything the Lord God had done for me (that is the story of my soul), to Israel's exodus out of the Egyptian bondage. The bondage wherein my soul groaned was sin, that terrible bondage, those terrible fetters which hinder one in approaching the Lord God; in following the Lord Jesus. The Lord God led me out of this bondage through Moses – through Father, whom He gave me, who, in being an instrument of the Lord Jesus, in His Name, freed my soul from its chains. Parting with Brother [Stefan Rembiszewski] was as if a passing through the Red Sea⁷² with dry feet, that last moment, when the danger of being drowned threatened. But the waters parted, stood as a wall to left and right, a dry path in the middle. The parting of the waters was as if those affections, which stood as a wall – without tears, without self-pity, so that I went along this road with dry feet. **Pharaoh then chased** with letters and threats, but did not turn me back. The Lord God gave His people manna [cf. Ex 16: 4 and the following verses]. And He is giving my soul the manna of His teaching, the principles of a new life. The first harvest of this manna was during a holy retreat. Then temptations came, difficulties. The Israelites grew weary of manna; they longed for garlic and Egyptian onions, and desired meat. So the Lord God gave them quails [cf. Ex 16: 13]. And temptation comes to the soul. This manna of simple, plain teaching becomes insufficient – it wants more, something extraordinary. It wants: visions, raptures which the soul desires, for which it is eager. The Lord God gives some souls such things, for they are necessary to fulfil His plans in them. But they are not at all necessary for salvation. One can be sanctified without them. Should the Lord God give one such a gift, and one avails oneself of it righteously, then it can be helpful, it can draw one closer to God. However, those who misused the quails in the desert were bitten by serpents. They began to call for help – and Moses interceded for the people. Then the Lord God commanded Moses to make a copper serpent and hang it on a tree. Whoever looked at it was healed [cf. Num 21: 6-9]. The Crucified Christ is the "serpent"; He is the medicine for all temptations, for all our illnesses. A soul, in gazing at the Crucified Saviour finds strength, healing and deliverance from all its miseries and temptations. Yet, Moses did not lead the people of Israel to the Promised Land, for he doubted; he lacked faith. The people of Israel demanded water, but there were only rocks all around. The Lord God instructed Moses to strike a rock. A spring of living water welled up out of it [cf. Ex 17: 1-7]. But Moses doubted in the Lord's Power. Likewise, a time may come when a soul will experience great aridity. We must not then doubt, lose faith, lose trust in the Lord God. One should believe in Him, trust in Him, and water will well up out of the rock (Diary 1, 181).*

The description, permeated by the colours of Biblical events in the *Book of Exodus* – like a palimpsest – is the backdrop to Frances Siedliska's story of redemption. Blessed Mary

⁷² Cf. Ex 14: 15-31.

continues this deep reflection about decisive events on her spiritual journey using another Old Testament image – the **capture of Jericho**:

The battles and struggles before the capture of Jericho [Josh 6: 1-20] are as if an image of a soul's struggles against temptations, and its victory over them. The final, the most terrible struggle is prior to death, when the walls of Jericho are collapsing. Stopping the sun [Josh 10: 13] can exemplify the stopping of life for a moment, as if a turning back at the gates of death. The Lord God can again grant a new grace to preserve life to His glory. Jericho is the Promised Land: heaven, eternal joy and merriment in God. May the merciful Lord lead us all to it! (Diary 1, 181).

This passage shows us that Blessed Mary did not just refer to Biblical figures, but also used - and very freely – many **BIBLICAL CONCEPTS, SYMBOLS and IMAGES**.⁷³

In going ever deeper into her writings, we become aware of their spiritual value. Blessed Mary understood that it is impossible to express the mystery of spiritual life directly or completely. It cannot be expressed in concepts or ideas in an unambiguous or complete way. Symbols, and other aforementioned literary means, can indeed facilitate the presentation of God's mysteries, His graces, in not only an aesthetic, poetic and pedagogically effective language,⁷⁴ but can also make a given verbal message appeal to not only the mind, but the heart too.

On the basis of the *Diary* we can isolate single symbols and structural symbols. The latter belong to biblical ideas: *covenant* and *Kingdom of God*, *God-Love* and *spiritual marriage*; we have, for example, symbolic figures: *King*, *Good Shepherd* or *Beloved*. We can also find other symbols, of less importance, or whole constellations of them – alongside those already quoted – complementing Blessed Mary's descriptions of spiritual experiences, for example: *heart*, *life*, *garden*, *water*, *treasure*, *robes*, *iron snake*, *child*, *stone*, *kiss*, *fire*, *mustard seed*, *lost sheep*, *widow's mite*, *night*, *mountain* (Tabor), and the like.

So we have a range of symbols, from the most simple in meaning, concerning the world of plants and animals, to those referring to some society, and to symbolism that touches on anthropology and mysticism, for example, betrothed relations or spiritual marriage. Let us try to go deeper into the more important ones:

To Frances Siedliska, **God is Love**. These words are “borrowed” from the First Letter of St. John the Apostle: *God is love, and he who abides in love abides in God, and God abides in him (1Jn 4:16)*, similar to the Pauline description of the Creator: *God of love* (cf. *2Cor 13:11*) This biblical truth has two basic meanings: the first concerns God Himself, the second – man.⁷⁵

⁷³ We can count the following amongst the other frequently used biblical notions or symbols in her writings: heart, life, love, covenant, mountain, “lost sheep”, “lion's mouth”, “hidden treasure”, “Kingdom of God”, passage through the Red Sea, the promised land, and the like.

⁷⁴ The formative aspect of the biblical quotes and motifs in Blessed Mary's writings is discussed in: K. Zawieja (Sr. M. Jana), *Biblical Motifs in the Letters of Blessed Mary of Jesus the Good Shepherd – Frances Siedliska – an Element of Religious Formation*, UAM, Poznań 2000.

⁷⁵ Let us recall Frances' moving confession with regard to the moment she became aware of God's love for her: *From then on a new life began for me, a new epoch. I heard that Jesus loves me. Who? The Lord Jesus! Whom? Me! That was enough for me. It truly seemed to me that my heart would burst, my soul would fly out of my body.*

To Blessed Mary, love - (Latin) *caritas* – is the highest and most mysterious attribute of God, His “name”, that is, His identity. However, it is not fully understandable to man, even through a profound experience of His loving presence. She writes about this in her *Diary*:

*I sometimes feel such things when the Lord Jesus deigns to give me a moment of prayer – true, this inner – “face to face” – conversation with the Lord Jesus is ever more precious and sweet to me: sometimes I am unable to say anything, but just sigh out: O Love, my Love! But then, without a sensual feeling, I feel as the soul unites with its God, particularly after Holy Communion, when the Lord Jesus, in His over-abundant love, gives Himself to us, when He Himself comes in His Divine Person to our soul. His Most Holy Body, His Blood, His Spirit, His Divinity – all this is within me, unites with me, He unites Himself with miserable me. O my God, my Love, who can grasp this, comprehend it? **It is necessary to be God and Love to understand God – Love** (Diary 2, 20).*

In another prayerful reflection, Blessed Mary asks Jesus:

Why are You so good, so infinitely good, sweet and full of love, my Lord Jesus? Why are You so good, sweet, so merciful to me in particular? Why do You deign to so enrapture, so fill my poor, filthy and sinful heart that it sometimes barely endures this inner plenitude of affections? Why, O Lord, why? The reply: for You are Love itself, Goodness and Mercy, and Love – can only give love!

O Lord, once again: “You have wounded my heart”, my Lord. You have wounded it, for You have given it to know You and love You a little; and then – You leave it on this wretched earth, in this exile, in this life, in this human wretchedness! (Diary 2, 16).

“God is the absolute and ultimate source of all being; but this universal principle of creation—the Logos, primordial reason—is at the same time a lover with all the passion of a true love”, writes Benedict the XVIth in his *Encyclical Letter Deus Caritas Est* (no. 10).⁷⁶ Blessed Mary wants to say the same thing, noting in her *Diary*:

*Today’s meditations moved me greatly, as each recollection of God’s love for us always does. And so I am still under the rule of that love, **for the Lord God created me out of love and for love**, and He is leading me along the road of love. Ah, my Lord, if I were to remember this, how different my life would be! How trustingly I would proceed, calmly, joyfully under Your guidance, how peaceful I would be in everything that I might come across, for You, Lord, have but plans of love for me, and everything You do and allow regarding me, You allow and do out of love for me. But above all, O Lord, how happy my heart would be to be under the eye of God-Love, to live with the God of*

*Life seemed to be different, a whole new world. I remember that when I went out into the garden on my own, whilst walking, I repeated to myself that the Lord Jesus loved me. I was as if in a rapture, as if in a constant spiritual elation. Out of happiness, joy, everything seemed to be different, another world, different trees, flowers. All was lit up- the truth that the Lord Jesus loves me was illuminated. True, I believed that Jesus loves people, for His passion and death, the Most Holy Sacrament... Are they not proof of His infinite love? But that is love in general, for all souls. But here, it was said that Jesus loves **me**; so He is thinking about me, occupying Himself with me. But how can He love such a creature, so miserable, a nothing. He loves, for **He is Love** [cf. 1Jn 4: 8; 4: 16] (A, 167-168).*

⁷⁶ The Creator’s “passionate love” decidedly differentiates the Christian conception of God from other images of the Creator, as Benedict the XVIth observes: *The one God in whom Israel believes, on the other hand, loves with a personal love. His love, moreover, is an elective love: among all the nations he chooses Israel and loves her— but he does so precisely with a view to healing the whole human race (DCE, 9).*

love, serve, possess the God of love in my heart, which was created to love, and has the capacity to love, and does not need to look far for the object of its love, for it has Him, it is carrying Him in itself; it is united with Him through the Blessed Sacrament and through grace (Diary 2, 65).

Blessed Mary understood and experienced the truth about God's exceptional love for us (cf. *1Jn* 4: 19). Pope Benedict the XVIth also underlines this primacy of God's initiative. God's love for man is one of the basic truths of Christianity. A Christian is born of this love. So the Commandment to love God and man is a kind of outcome and, simultaneously, a response to that primal Love, the source of man's existence, of his being.⁷⁷ Blessed Mary, in discovering these truths, realized that if God creates, calls into existence, Christians are called out of God's love, and to love God and neighbour. During a retreat in April, 1886, she noted:

O my one Saviour! Through Your mercy You gave me to more clearly understand this truth, that You created me out of love, and for love. You created me to be a child of Your love... (Diary 2, 114).

We also find the most essential biblical anthropological conceptions in Blessed Mary's writings: God created us out of love and for love, as we were created in ***His image and likeness***:

*My King and Lord, O what have You done for me, O how You love me! You love the work of Your hands, this soul [created] in **Your image and likeness**, and You deigned – though You knew of its malice, ingratitude and lovelessness – to choose it, to call it to Your service, to Your work, not being discouraged by anything (Diary 2, 167).⁷⁸*

So love is the purpose of human life. Blessed Mary opened herself to this truth during a retreat at the end of 1884, to which a reflection in her *Diary* testifies:

*On the 25th of November, on Tuesday evening, we began the retreat. From the outset, Lord, You granted me great graces, many fervent feelings. The first meditation was about our beginnings, of us being created out of love; **that love is our goal, and also our road to the goal**. They so overcame me that, not being able to bear the intensity of these feelings within me, I paced about, as it seemed to me that my heart might burst under their plenitude. The Lord God's love for us, His infinite love, which gave us the capacity to accept love, too, and to give love for love, is so inexpressible, so incomprehensible and so marvellous (Diary1, 270-271).*

*Being Christian – as Benedict the XVIth points out - is not the result of an ethical choice or a lofty idea, but the encounter with an event, a person, which gives life a new horizon and a decisive direction (DCE no. 1). So the living Person of Christ is that Sphere wherein God's love assumes Flesh for us. Blessed Mary opened herself to this truth, as indicated by a note in her *Diary* (November the 22nd, 1885):*

*The Lord Jesus gave me a clearer understanding of the Lord God's infinite love for us, and by a ray of His light He clarified the words of St. John to me: **“For this is how God loved***

⁷⁷ Blessed Mary left us several reflections on the above subject, cf.: *Diary* 2, 91; *Diary* 2, 63.

⁷⁸ Reference to *Gen* 1: 26-27: this passage is the basis of biblical and Christian anthropology. It is not surprising that Fr. A. Lechert also recalls this in his teaching (cf. *Diary* 2, 101).

the world: he gave his only Son, so that everyone who believes in him may not perish but may have eternal life” [Jn 3:16].

*“For this is how God loved the world” – here the Lord Jesus gave me to understand a little, to glorify, to wonder at the love of the Eternal Father, Who gave His only Son, the object of His eternal love and pleasure. To whom? For whom? For His creatures, of themselves nothingness, for this malice and sin, for these ingrates that we are. And He again reveals to us the love of God’s Son, Who gave Himself, offered Himself for this passion, for death for us: “He loved us and gave Himself for us”. O Lord, human reason cannot comprehend **such** love, cannot understand it. It seems to be impossible, but because it is so – for You, Lord, revealed it, and Holy Church gives us to believe it – so, my One Saviour, my Lord and God, what remains to the soul to whom You gave to know and understand this? To love You, to love You above all else; to, by Your holy grace, give itself to You, and to now live only Your life, in You and for You (Diary 2, 110-111).*

Blessed Mary discovered that love can free us from seeking ourselves, from concentrating on our own affairs, and to seek but the will of the Beloved, with the power that flows from His Cross. For God’s glory, His love, was manifest in Jesus - Man, in the Crucified Christ (cf. *Rom 5: 8; 8: 32; Jn 3: 16* and the following verses). She wrote a prayerful reflection in her *Diary* on this subject (March, 1895):⁷⁹

... My most merciful Lord – from the depths of my soul, falling at Your feet, I renounce all (other) thoughts, desires, opinions, and totally give myself to loving and fulfilling Your holy Covenant of Love. Father said that various difficulties and temptations opposed to this would come, but, supported by Your grace, I am to be faithful to You and not for a moment depart from this road; I am to let myself be led, even if I were to know nothing, and were to be [plunged] into great darkness. But a great love of the Lord Jesus is needed for this, for only love gives one the power and strength for everything – and above all, the Love of the Crucified One; for can one hesitate, or not fulfil something when Crucified Love desires it? (Diary 2, 335-336).

God’s love - manifested on the Cross - made God Himself visible as Love. The Heavenly Father, in His Son Jesus, gave a Face to His love, sound and timbre... It is worth noting that Benedict the XVIth expresses this revelation of God in a similar way in his first encyclical, *Deus Caritas Est*, wherein the pope leads us into the subject of the Cross in the context of a growth in love, its purification, but also its uniqueness and definitiveness. So, to the Holy Father, the mystery of the Cross is *the essence of love and indeed of human life itself* (DCE no. 6). Hence the Paschal mysteries of Christ, living and proclaimed, are a starting point; for God’s love should not only be contemplated, but also experienced.

All of us, like Blessed Mary, can enter into the dynamics of the *Paschal Events*, in order to encounter Love and learn to respond to It through the fullness of love; of God and neighbour. The awareness and the experience of the truth that God did not spare His Son for

⁷⁹ The “name” “Love Incarnate” appears in *Spiritual Diary* along with “Love crucified”. Both “names” express the most important mysteries in M. Mary’s life and in the Church’s too. We read: *O, how I fear this – to offend, to wound, to betray my Lord, Love Incarnate – incomprehensible. O, may I never repay such great love – with such ingratitude. It is true that I am capable of anything, but I implore You, my King, through Your Passion and Death, through Your Mercy – do not allow such a misfortune to befall me (Diary 2, 387).* Numerous adjectives and nouns that define the attributes of God-Love also appear in *Spiritual Diary*, for example: *infinite Love, incomprehensible (Diary 2, 3); the Lord Jesus- Love eternal, infinite (Diary 2, 86; God and Lord of Love (Diary 2, 140); my most sweet Love (Diary 2, 283); Mercy and Love itself (Diary 2, 362).*

our sakes, gives us strength, as expressed in St. Paul's words, that nothing can *separate from the love of Christ, neither life nor death...* (cf. *Rom* 8: 31. 39). Hence, the truth that *God is Love* can only be seen in the context of the Cross (cf. *1Jn* 4: 8 and the following verses).

Blessed Mary "names" not only God the Father and His Incarnate Son, but also the Holy Spirit - Love. Here is an example of her moving reflection on the above subject on the Feast of the Ascension, 1891:

Let me be there wholly, where my one treasure is – my God and Lord! On the day of Your Ascension, You deigned to remind me of Your Most Holy Mother, and You sweetly drew me to unite with Her in spirit, with Your Apostles and disciples, to, in spirit, prepare myself with them in the Cenacle for the coming of the Sanctifier – Infinite Love – the Holy Spirit (Diary 2, 284).

Blessed Mary discovered the model of perfection in the life of the Holy Trinity, to which she aspired. She understood that God is Himself in a totally mutual self-giving of Persons. One can only think about the God-Relation of Persons in a Trinitarian sense, as the essence of love is a dialogue, a relation...⁸⁰ So Blessed Mary shows us that the ultimate purpose of human existence is union with God in love. Whilst she was in Albano, she noted (September 21, 1888):

O my God, my love! You created me out of love, and You love me: You created me for Your love; to be lovingly united with You as the ultimate end of my existence (Diary 2, 233).

Love really does mean to be at one with "Others", in the sense of respecting the otherness of others. So oneness in love assumes the recognition of differences. Love accepts differences and the need to yield to another, and thus makes one free. The logic of love – as W. Kasper points out – requires one to leave space for the other, and to make sacrifices.⁸¹ Love is also pain, a cleansing fire, or even death – as great mystics say. To end this but touched on issue,⁸² let us read two of Blessed Mary's beautiful and profound prayers, prayers that situate her sentiments and experiences in the deepest currents of mysticism and spirituality:

Since morning the Lord Jesus drew me firmly to an interior life with Him. I gave myself to Him in this and for anything. Before Mass, the Lord occasioned that I read a fragment on love and unity with Him (an excerpt from the life of St. Angela of Foligno). The Lord gave me to find it. My whole soul was absorbed by it. O my Lord, my Love! How You love us! How wretched I am, ungrateful, miserable and full of iniquity, sin, of lovelessness in regard to Your purity, holiness, perfection... But, O Lord, have pity – I cannot live like this, I implore You for Your love, life in union with You, that there be not two, Lord, not two ruling, directing. For how can ugliness and beauty, sin and Holiness, lovelessness and Love be together? Let there be one, You

⁸⁰ Here we touch upon the question of the self-awareness of the Divine Persons. More on this subject in: J. J. O'Donnell, *The Mystery of the Holy Trinity*, Kraków 1993, pp. 124-126; W. Kasper, *The God of Jesus Christ*, Wrocław 1996, p. 358; J. D. Szczurek, *Contemporary Issues in Trinitarian Theology*, in "Analecta Cracoviensia" 32 (2000), pp. 255-257.

⁸¹ Cf. W. Kasper, *La croce come rivelazione dell'amore di Dio*, in *La vision del Dio invisibile nel volto del crocifisso*, Edizioni OCD, Roma 2008, pp. 26-27.

⁸² The subject of love in the life and writings of the Foundress requires, of course, a separate and deeper study.

alone, Lord. You, the Lord, King – and I, ugliness itself, wickedness and wretchedness, burning out, and continuously purifying in the fire of Your love. And so, thanks to Your grace, voluntarily and lovingly devoted to You, drawing life from You, living You, I do not now desire any activity of my own, my own will – only this, to lovingly and voluntarily do that which You shall be the author and driving force). Amen! (Diary 1, 251).

This evening (...) I looked at my ring. I thought – ah! I have this ring from the Lord Jesus! I am espoused! To Whom? To the Son of God, to God-Man, to the Second Person of the Blessed Trinity! Who? Such a wretch, such nothingness – espoused to, united with my Lord and God? O my God, my Love, Love inconceivable, incomprehensible, ah, enkindle, envelop, destroy me in the fire of Love so that I may love You above all else in the world, above all else that might be in heaven and on earth – so that I might love my God and His Only Begotten Son, Our Lord Jesus Christ! (Diary 2, 18).

I think that any commentary here would be superfluous...

B. Despite the depth of these reflections, one can see a certain simplicity of expression. She does not use the sophisticated symbols of great mystics, rich in meaning and full of expression (for example, St. John of the Cross). She uses rather simple symbols, one could say “domestic”, like water, garden, child, sheep, heart... She does not create refined “stories”, so literary and doctrinally popular, like St. Teresa of Avila in her *Interior Castle*. Yet her crystal clear imagination creates room for reflections in biblical light, and eventually discovers an image capable of expressing the mystery of sanctity, of symbolism that is able to grasp its sense in the light of truth ... It is the image of the **Beloveds love** drawn from the *Song of Songs*...

Every Sister of Nazareth, in looking at her wedding ring, like Blessed Mary (in the aforementioned passage from her *Diary*), recalls her beloved verse of the biblical song: ***Dilectus meus mihi et ego Illi*** (*Song 2: 16*). With this seal, the word of God, received at final vows, as we read in our “Law of love”: *We acknowledge that we know the Beloved’s voice, inviting us to a special intimacy, and we desire to respond to it with our whole being.*⁸³

And this is not Mother Mary’s only reference to this “biblical jewel”; as we read in the *A Word to the Reader* in her *Diary*, this whole collection of spiritual notes can be described as *a sort of personal “Song of Songs” ... for in it Frances Siedliska reveals the inner most rooms of her soul. It is precisely there that the Divine Beloved continuously seeks His beloved to bestow grace upon her, while such a soul – feeling itself to be unworthy of God’s love – yet calls the beloved: “Draw me ... let us make haste”* (M. T. Jasionowicz, *A Word to the Reader, Diary 1, V*). In Blessed Mary’s *Diary* we find valuable information on the *Song of Songs*, for she was an attentive reader of this holy Book:

With Father’s permission, I am now reading “Song of Songs” with Martini’s commentary. It is the sweetest of readings, the best expression of what I feel, the best rendering of what the Lord Jesus, through His mercy, poured into my soul (Diary 2, 56).

⁸³ *Law of Love. Constitutions of the Congregation of the Holy Sisters of Nazareth*, Rome 2002, p. 8.

So Blessed Mary's frequent reference to this biblical song⁸⁴, in order to express the state of her soul through images drawn from it, does not surprise us. For one can compare her spiritual notes to "an X-ray" of a soul which, under the pressure of grace, pours out on paper the feelings, convictions and "answers" given to it in dialogues by beloved ones (M. T. Jasionowicz, *Diary I*, V).

And so, alongside the biblical image of God-Love, the *Diary*, from the first to the last page, spins a golden thread of symbols and images, full of light, colours, aromas and feelings from the hidden gardens of *Song of Songs*... And all in order to better convey the reality of the spiritual communion experienced between a soul and God, to more profoundly express the mystery of a *spiritual marriage*.

The heart of the poem is a love that is able to overcome all obstacles: **strong as death** (*Song* 8: 6),⁸⁵ understood as a mutual self-giving, as lovers belonging to each other (cf. *Song* 2: 16; 6: 3). So the central idea in Blessed Mary's *Diary* is God's love, presented as an unceasing pursuit of union and fullness:

How marvellous Your work, my Lord, how marvellous Your love! Always at work, always active – yet so strong and calm, powerful like death. So, too, with me, once commenced, You deign to continue Your work, and You now occasion that I fear every single thing, particularly every affection that would not have You as its beginning, as its aim... (Diary I, 262).

So to Blessed Mary the essence of love is a complete self-giving, which she compares to death. On the 17th of January, 1886, the Feast of the Most Holy Name of Jesus, she wrote:

*The Lord Jesus is, above all, now giving me a great desire to love Him, to love Him ever more, ever more fervently. And as self-giving is the essence of love, the Lord God is mainly demanding this of me; self-giving in the smallest details, in the subtlest shades of things; the Lord Jesus ought to rule within me in everything, whereas I [ought] to **die to myself** (Diary 2, 144).*

Hence she asks Jesus: *Grant me the grace – I implore You – to never forget [about] what You have done for me, and that I might be prepared, by Your grace, to give my life, my whole being, to shed my blood for Your love! (Diary 2, 337).*

The **kingly** love dimension is stressed in *Song of Songs*.⁸⁶ So this "kingship" linked with the wedding tradition⁸⁷ has emotional connotations; the poem also depicts the beloveds'

⁸⁴ So this collection of love songs, universal in its expression, appealing to the heart of man in every epoch, of eight parts, with fascinating constellations of symbols, passing before the reader's eyes in cascades of oriental images, is a spiritual mirror of Francis Siedliska's artistically sensitive soul, as it is of many other mystics before her (St. John of the Cross, St. Teresa of Avila etc.). And it is not surprising as the Judaic tradition and early Christian – patristic tradition interpreted this song about spousal love exclusively in spiritual terms. Thus the poem became an expression, and even a kind of celebration of love between Jahwe and Israel (in rabbinic commentaries), between Christ and the Church, a soul and Jesus (also Mary and Jesus) in patristic commentaries.

⁸⁵ The words of *Song of Songs* 8: 6, are a poetic "seal", the "essence" of the whole poem.

⁸⁶ See *Song of Songs* 1: 4: *The king has brought me into his chambers*... Here the hero of poem is a "king". So love is a kingly attribute, noble. In verses 12-17 we again find this kingly quality of love, which is here, moreover, extolled in terms of its beauty; as a celebration, a kingly feast.

⁸⁷ Cardinal G. Ravasi, in his commentary on *Song of Songs*, observes: ... *in the East, wedding ceremonies are seen in kingly terms; the bridegroom is the king and the bride a queen who is led into a palace, that is, the married chambers*... G. Ravasi, *Song of Songs... Like a Seal on Your Heart*, Kraków 2005, p. 47.

beauty and intimacy. In her *Diary*, Blessed Mary expresses the same admiration and inexpressible adoration for the King- Beloved, God-Man:

This morning, having read a meditation I wanted to reflect and think about it till these words came to mind: “Who’s beloved are you? The beloved of the King of Heaven, the beloved of the Son of God, the Second Person of the Most Holy Trinity, God-Man! You are His beloved!” Ah, Lord! At these words my heart nearly burst, nearly melted in tears of gratitude, of love, of admiration for You. And more came to mind: “My Lord Jesus, my God, my King, has loved me from time immemorial, looked at me since my childhood, drew me to His love, wanted to have me for His child, for His beloved. Upon whom did the Lord, the King, upon whom did God look? (Diary 2, 24).

Blessed Mary continues her reflection, which turns into a dialogue with the “King” and then into a simple but beautiful - in its profoundness - parable:

O Lord, my Lord, were an earthly king to take a country girl for his beloved, the poorest, coarse, deprived, uncomely, indeed repugnant, by all accounts a revolting one, and on top of all this, were that girl to have earlier lost her innocence, given her heart to another, to a peasant, her equal – were that king to love this poor girl, take her to His palaces, chose her for his beloved, give her a share of all His treasures, and moreover entrust to her the control of His palace, his household and children – what would people say, what would they think of all this? How everyone would wonder at such incomprehensible goodness and kindness, such unheard of love! Ah, my Lord and King, You have done a thousand-fold more for me, for You are not an earthly king, but the Heavenly King, infinite God and Lord (...) You now call this wretch to such (...) a very close union with You! (...).O my Lord and God, I cannot move around Your wonderful, kingly palaces, I cannot walk them, speak of them (Diary 2, 25).

This image, which serves as a background for the story of the biblical Beloveds, is universal and archetypal. It is a wonderful garden over which the sun shines, of mornings and nights, where winds blow, and refreshing dew drops ooze... The whole of nature is reflected in this peculiarly eastern harmony of colours, sounds and fragrances that remind one of a tapestry... But the garden is closed (*Song* 4: 12) - it embodies an incomprehensible mystery of the love of the Beloveds. It is not surprising that Blessed Mary could not walk, “move about” her own garden of God’s blessings and mysteries...

The tent of the beloveds is an image of a temple,⁸⁸ where God meets His beloved - Israel. To Blessed Mary, the palace of the King-Beloved, the temple of the Eternal Priest, is her inner self, the “closed garden” of her soul – in a special way at the moment of a Eucharistic union:

After Holy Communion my soul could but utter: “O Love, my Love!” – it was thanksgiving, worship, adoration; in this self-giving, as if a fading away into the Presence of the King Who was in my soul (...). He is really alive in my soul as in His Kingdom, His State; He is in possession of the whole of my soul, He disposes of everything – whereas I am at His beck and call, at His service, for His love (Diary 2, 290-291).

⁸⁸ The mention of cedars and cypresses in *Song of Songs* 1: 17 introduces a symbolic-liturgical note, as boards of such wood were used in Solomon’s temple (cf. *1Kings* 6: 15-18). Cf. E. Bosetti, *The One Who Loves My Heart. Search and Ecstasy. Commentary on Song of Songs*, Kraków 2008, p. 67.

So Blessed Mary spiritually experienced that which Pope Benedict the XVIth clarifies in his encyclical:

How might love be experienced so that it can fully realize its human and Divine promise? Here we can find a first, important indication in the Song of Songs, an Old Testament book well known to the mystics. (...) In the course of the book two different Hebrew words are used to indicate “love”. First there is the word ‘dodim’, a plural form suggesting a love that is still insecure, indeterminate and searching. This comes to be replaced by the word ‘ahabà’, which the Greek version of the Old Testament translates with the similar-sounding agape, which, as we have seen, becomes the typical expression for the biblical notion of love. By contrast with an indeterminate, “searching” love, this word expresses the experience of a love which involves a real discovery of the other... (...). Love embraces the whole of existence in each of its dimensions, including the dimension of time. It could hardly be otherwise, since its promise looks towards its definitive goal: love looks to the eternal. Love is indeed “ecstasy”, not in the sense of a moment of intoxication, but rather as a journey, an ongoing exodus out of the closed inward-looking self towards its liberation through self-giving... (DCE, 6).

However, on the path to union with God, one also experiences the pain of seeking the Beloved during the “night of faith”. Or rather, perhaps, discovering His presence in “absence”... Every great love is familiar with nights of the soul; they open the wounds of longing. Blessed Mary describes this in her *Diary*:

I trust in God’s mercy that in will and heart I persevered by my Lord, but at times my heart as if inclined to temptations, and I began to feel the Lord Jesus less and less in my soul. Awaking sad at night, I sought my Lord, called for Him, begged and implored in the words of the Song of Songs, the ones I remembered, I called for my Divine Beloved, that He might deign to look upon me, that He deign to have pity on my soul. I woke up sad, but I still felt my Lord in my soul; I felt that wound by which He deigned to wound my heart, the wound by which I am as if bound to Him, bound to the Lord Jesus. I felt my Lord, but later I lost this feeling of the Lord God’s presence – I was alone.

Where has my Lord and God gone, my Only Saviour, my Love? Where has my Light gone, my Good, my Treasure, my life, where? Where? Where is the heaven that was in my soul? This heaven is the Lord Jesus, and heaven is wherever He is (Diary 2, 39-40).

In experiencing such nights, Frances Siedliska became like, identified with the Shepherdess (Beloved) in *Song of Songs*, who sought her Beloved.⁸⁹ To seek, actually means to “see” that Presence in the night of faith. Suffering, a sense of the absence of Love, is, in

⁸⁹ Cf, *Song of Songs* 1: 7-8: this passage seems to be a “dialogue” in silence, expressing the change from the formal to the familiar, and simultaneously a monologue, both “sweet” and “bitter”, as the Beloved is far away. Her face covered by a veil, the Beloved- Shepherdess is prepared to risk disgrace (she could be taken for a harlot), or even death. In her, who hurries in search of the Beloved amongst shepherds’ flocks, is expressed that which enriches and adorns, so to speak, this biblical song, which assumes its highest form of expression in chapters, 3:1-4 and 5: 2-8: absence, nostalgia, tension, void, the sense of rejection, fear and anxiety and all begotten in the fire of love... Such is the “night of faith”, which purifies Frances’ love.

reality, an experience of love, an attempt at “seeing” the Countenance of the Beloved.⁹⁰ Blessed Mary wrote:

O my God, my Lord! Your Divine Person deigned to inwardly reveal Itself to me, drawing me to You in such a way that Your life, Your deeds began to interest me intensely, as the deeds of a beloved person. At times You presented Yourself to [my] soul, not materially, but spiritually; I sensed You – not seeing [You]; and that Divine presence overcame me by a most profound adoration, love, joy, a most profound desire to do everything according to Your pleasure, Your holy will (Diary 2, 361).

To the Beloved in *Song of Songs*, as for Blessed Mary, the Beloved becomes Presence despite His absence. It is faith that makes us endure that night of apparent emptiness, the absence of Christ – the biblical “Dod”.⁹¹

Blessed Mary wrote (January 23, 1885):

Sometimes, for hours, I cannot go to You concealed in the Blessed Sacrament of the Altar, I cannot wholly occupy myself with You amidst conversations and various matters, though it seems to me that You, my Lord, are pleased when I do Your will, or rather when I accept all these occupations as of Your will; but my heart goes out to You. And when I am alone at night, pining, I cling to You, my Lord and God. But I cannot keep vigil for long, so I retire for the night, with You, my King, and my heart feels how I think of You even in my sleep; I awake, and You, Lord, are present in my thoughts and heart (Diary 2, 38).

The world described in *Song of Songs* is a lyrical, poetic reality – true in the sense of human experiences, or simply universal, yet not a specific situation. Is that not an experience of faith that leads to love? It encompasses absence, silence, nights, but love in its essence is surprise, astonishment, a new song... So it was to Blessed Mary, who, continuing the above reflection, writes:

*A couple of days ago, when, in spirit, I found myself in the presence of the Most Holy Trinity, the Lord Jesus' spirit immediately bore me to the depths of my soul. I recalled the Lord Jesus' words: “**Anyone who loves me will keep my word, and my Father will love him, and we shall come to him and make a home in him**” [Jn 14:23], and in utmost joy of soul I sought the Most Holy Trinity, not beyond myself, but by God's mercy – based on the Lord Jesus' promise – I sought It in my soul; there I worshipped and praised [It], rejoiced in my Lord and God's so incomprehensible mercy! (Diary 2, 38).*

In Blessed Mary's *Diary*, apart from the word “seek”, we also find the verb “draw”, from the biblical poem.⁹² Like the *Song of Songs* heroine, she too takes the initiative; she

⁹⁰ Cf. *Song of Songs* 3: 1-5: this fragment superbly evokes that experience of love in “absence” and in the “night”.

⁹¹ In *Song of Songs* the word “beloved” (Hebrew *dod*) appears 31 times in 117 verses. The word's consonants are the root of the name David (Hebrew *dwd*), so it indirectly a song about Messianic hopes; “*dodi*” is its most affectionate, tender form, repeated by the Bride with great pleasure, it is translated: “*my dearest*”, “*my beloved*”. But this does not fully convey the affection and expressiveness of the Hebrew original, which expresses tenderness, but also the intimacy of the Bride's total self-giving. Blessed Mary uses similar terms to express her relations with Jesus; in her *Diary* her union and the intensity of her relations are almost always described by the use of a “loving appellation”- my: *Sweetest, Dearest, Most Beloved, Beloved, One King, my Love...*

⁹² We read in the fourth verse of the poem: *Draw me after you, let us make haste.*

passes from the desire expressed earlier in her prayer to a specific request, expressed in a beautiful, biblical style:

*Ah, I now see Who You are, and what I am, wretched, a great sinner! My most merciful Saviour, O how I ought to adhere to You, my Lord and God. I implore You, **draw me to follow the fragrance of Your oils**, and keep me close to You, so that I might not perish (Diary 2, 42-43).*

The Hebrew verb *mashak* - used here to express the rapture of love, was used by the prophets in reference to God, for example, Hosea: *I [drew]them with cords of compassion, with the bands of love...* - with these words God attempts to gain His people (*Hos* 11: 4). Interestingly, the verb “draw” was used in the New Testament in relation to faith (cf. *Jn* 6: 44; 12: 32). Blessed Mary used this biblical image of “drawing” in her moving prayer to express both meanings of the event. What is more, it also served her to describe the boundless gulf between the ontological states of the Beloveds: the nothingness of the sinner and God’s enlivening omnipotence.⁹³

In the earlier quoted prayer, written on the 1st of May, 1895, Blessed Mary points to the consequences, or rather the fruits, of this “drawing” of the soul by Jesus; in that increasing proximity with Him - “His life”, “His deeds - Blessed Mary’s sole interest became the life and deeds of a “beloved person”... (cf. *Diary* 2, 361).

Another motif that we have noticed in her prayer is the *fragrance of oils*. In the biblical poem it heralds the presence of the Beloved, even if it is not noticed by his Beloved. The fragrance⁹⁴ left by the Beloved’s hand on the latch (*Song* 5: 2-8) increases the nostalgia for Him... Frances – like the Beloved in *Song of Songs* – permeated by the Beloved’s fragrance, the aroma of mystical graces, declares: *The Lord – like a fiery flame – (...) **draws me to love by His own love** ...* (cf. *Diary* 2, 130); *He at times drew me so strongly to Himself that it seemed to me **that He had deigned to give me wings to fly to Him** ...* (*Diary* 2, 149);⁹⁵ *that I drew life from the holy spring of Your Feet’s Divine Wounds – there I stayed, (thanks to Your grace), close, **drawn by the bonds of Your love**...* (*Diary* 2, 359); ... ***You drew me to Yourself by Your love**, always in one direction – towards Your love and that most sweet union with You* (*Diary* 2, 290).⁹⁶

Mother Mary also uses the symbols of a **loving embrace** and of **union**, from the biblical poem. In *Song of Songs*, the embrace, and particularly the union of body and soul are the heights of love. The theology of marital love is contained in the images of this loving

⁹³ Our Foundress’ reflection (February the 3rd, 1892) splendidly depicts her idea: *The stay in Paris, and everything I experienced there, taught me yet more tangibly, yet more clearly, that without You, Lord, without life totally in accord with You – I cannot live. It seems to me that my heart is like a bottomless abyss, which only the Lord Jesus can satiate and fill. The abyss of my wretchedness, my need of love, is calling infinite Love to impart itself to this wretched sinner!* (*Diary* 2, 311-312).

⁹⁴ The descriptions of the beauty of the Beloveds’ in *Song of Songs* are suffused with a range of numerous fragrances; the Bride says, for example: *my nard gave forth its fragrances* (1: 12); *My beloved is to me a bag of myrrh* (1: 13); *My love is to me a cluster of henna blossoms in the vineyards of En-ged’i* (1: 14); *His cheeks are like beds of spices, yielding fragrance. His lips are lilies, distilled liquid myrrh* (5: 13).

⁹⁵ The reflection is from *Spiritual Diary*, written down on February the 7th, 1886, when Blessed Mary was 44 (a mature woman). In writing this she must have had a very vivid experience of God’s loving presence.

⁹⁶ However, Blessed Mary endeavours to convey to her spiritual children this fragrance of loving the word of God. She wrote to the young “Teci” (later Sr. Laureta).

ecstasy – a perfect communion of the Beloveds. Blessed Mary, paraphrasing a passage of the *First Letter to the Corinthians* (1Co 13: 12-13), declares:

*It is an inexhaustible source, from which one can never draw enough, never satiate oneself, never quench one's desires, for the more one knows, the more one desires to love, and **the more one loves, the more one aspires to union, to possession of the Beloved, the One object of love.** A thought from Father's teaching drew me above all, which I read at meditation; that after the struggle and the suffering the soul would **possess the Lord.** That moment of joy appeared to me, when I shall first see my Beloved Lord Jesus, Whom I see here as if through a mist, only through faith, while there I shall see Him face to face! [1Co 13: 12-13]. And I trust in **His mercy that I shall possess Him forever** (Diary 2, 290).⁹⁷*

Blessed Mary experienced the joy of the closest presence of the Beloved.⁹⁸ She describes the profound sense of this love:

*But – my Lord – here it is not about me; **for in love it is all about the Beloved!** So, first and foremost, my King, I desire Your consolation above any sweetness. That is what I desire, my One King, and I ask You for this grace, that the sweetness You might deign to give me – a sweetness more precious than anything in the world! – might not be precious to me for my sake (for my soul feels like a fish in water in this sweetness), but that it might be precious to me because You desire to grant it to me and because You give it to me, because your Love has pleasure in the joy that You grant me (Diary 2, 291-292).*

In this sense – Blessed Mary specifies - *true love does not think of itself; totally taken up by the Beloved – it trusts Him, entrusts itself to Him and leaves Him to be solicitous over it* (Diary 2, 313). So the infinitely loving God (precisely because He is infinitely loving) – according to Blessed Mary – has unrestricted access to her soul, and works within her through His grace. She attempts to express (very evocatively) the Lord's inexpressible presence and action in her reflections based on what St. Augustine had said, namely, that it is useless to seek the Lord-Creator of life beyond oneself as He is “closer to us than we are to ourselves”. So she thus depicts the true Countenance of God, Who loves us more than we love ourselves:

*... feeling His presence in my soul, I sometimes thought that one is never – seeing someone with the bodily eyes or having exterior signs of His presence – as certain of it as with that feeling of God's presence which the Lord Jesus was giving me to feel in my soul, and as with the faith, which teaches us that this holy presence is real. (...). The Lord Jesus(...) gave me to feel that **“He is closer to me than I am to myself”**(...), and I had such an interior feeling of this, such certitude, that it was difficult to express, for I felt that He, the Lord Jesus, is the **source of life** within me, **He is life Itself**,⁹⁹ that is, the closest, the only close One, for in Him I draw everything, without Him I would not exist for even a moment, neither spiritually nor physically, so He is closer to me than I am to myself, and I am nothingness and death (Diary 2, 56-57).*

⁹⁷ Having this great desire, Blessed Mary, aware of who her Beloved is, confesses: **I - nothingness; He – Everything.** O, how good it is for nothingness to nestle up (draw close) to the One Who is everything! (Diary 2, 295).

⁹⁸ She writes: ... My One and Only Lord – it is so sweet, so blissful... O Lord, with what joy You give Yourself to this most sweet communion with me! (Diary 2, 291).

⁹⁹ I am the way, and the truth, and the life; no one comes to the Father, but by me (Jn 14: 6).

As has already been stressed, *Song of Songs* teaches us that the Beloveds' deepest of unions is marked not only by a **wound**, or **sickness** out of "love", but also by an **experience of death**... The one who loves is prepared to die for the beloved (cf. *Jn* 15: 13). The triumph of love consists in a complete transformation of the one who loves. To Mother Mary, the **symbol of an embrace also signifies dying with the Beloved. Whilst in Chaville (February the 13th, 1899** (three years before her death), she strongly states:

I had a consolation in that I did not feel any consolation, for You desired it to be so; for I desire, my King – through Your holy grace – to serve You for You Yourself, to love You for Your infinite love, with which You first loved me and gave Yourself to torment for me, to death on the Cross – "Tu mi Jesus totum me, amplexus es in Crucis" (Diary 2, 382).¹⁰⁰

Blessed Mary show us that the *essence of love is giving oneself to God in everything*.¹⁰¹ Of this rich range of motifs, symbols and images, drawn from *Song of Songs*, one cannot forget that which was of most importance to Blessed Mary,¹⁰² and which is also a theme of the biblical song... She mentions it in her reflections of the 21st of January, 1885:

Finally, my Only Saviour, You gave me to savour the sweetness of these words, Your words: "Dilectus meus mihi et ego Illi"¹⁰³ [Song 2:16]. Yes, my Only Lord and King. You of Your mercy are my God, Lord, Beloved, while I, through Your grace, and drawn by Your love, want to be Your child, Your subject, Your beloved for evermore (Diary 2, 35).

The unusual last stanza, the "spring scene", permeated by a dialogue of the Beloveds (*Song* 2:8-17), *begins with an unusually solemn profession of love, the most beautiful in "Song of Songs", and one of the most moving in literature*.¹⁰⁴ Verse 16, in the original: *dodi li wa'ani lo...* (*I am my beloved's and my beloved is mine*).¹⁰⁵ So this declaration, being, so to speak, a summary of the whole of *Song of Songs*, is expressed in barely four words, "like a breath, or a very short melody".¹⁰⁶

The French exegete, A. Feuillet, saw these words as a "formula of mutual belonging". They are, so to speak, a repeat of the first, and simultaneously, eternal love hymn, sung for the first time in the Garden of Eden, and repeated by every new Adam of all races and nations: *this at last is bone of my bones and flesh of my flesh (Gen 2: 23)*.¹⁰⁷ So it is an expression of total reciprocity, the joy of being for each other. However, this love sigh hides a tremendous allusion within itself, for this formula, in the extended version of the Old Testament, is used to describe the **covenant** relation that binds God to His people: *the Lord shall be your God and you will be his people for His own possession*.¹⁰⁸ This confession of mutual belonging, and so,

¹⁰⁰ (Latin) *My Jesus, You embraced me on the Cross.*

¹⁰¹ Cf. *Diary* 2, 144).

¹⁰² The fact that she had these words engraved on her wedding ring, and having it continued as a custom in the Congregation, testifies as to how important they were to Blessed Mary; words that epitomized the purpose of her life, her relationship with God.

¹⁰³ (Latin) *My beloved is mine and I am his.*

¹⁰⁴ Cf. G. Ravasi, *Song of Songs...*, op. cit., p. 76.

¹⁰⁵ This verse was almost literally repeated in *Song of Songs* 6: 3: *ani le dodu w dodu li...* (*I am my beloved's and my beloved is mine*).

¹⁰⁶ G. Ravasi, *Song of Songs...*, op. cit., p. 76.

¹⁰⁷ *Ibid.*

¹⁰⁸ Cf. :*Deut* 26:17-18; *Hos* 2:25; *Jer* 7:23; *Ezek* 34:30-31.

too, a perfect communion between the two Beloveds, gave rise to a new “mystical” interpretation of this biblical Book, as a marriage song between God and His people. And this is very significant, as from that moment one could interpret *Song of Songs* theologically. The prophets, starting with Hosea, began a kind of reinterpretation of the covenant with God on the basis of the language of love taken from this biblical poem. And a similar thing occurred with Frances Siedliska...

However, before we move on to that, it is worth recalling once again how attentively Blessed Mary read the Bible. And even if not all of the allusions to the biblical poem presented in this chapter were consciously made by her, sometimes perhaps spontaneously, then the use of the image or lexis,¹⁰⁹ so typical of the poem, testify that it was her favourite reading, the “taste” and “fragrance” of which gradually permeated Blessed Mary’s mind, memory, imagination, heart and soul.

Let us ask the Lord that our sense of faith might also be able to feel the sweetness and bitterness of the Word of God, that our hearts might feel the aroma of “Christ’s beautiful fragrance”, our Beloved, even in the night of purgation, that we might, in Him, be a *pleasant fragrance for God*...¹¹⁰

The next important biblical subject, complementing the previous one, is the already mentioned issue of the **covenant with God**...

A covenant is one of the means by which the Lord God gives man the possibility of a profound relationship with Him. For in the history of redemption, a covenant is manifest in all its stages; it assumes various forms.¹¹¹ However, it always aims to bring man to a true, deep and intimate relationship with God. In a certain sense, to a union that is expressed in a communion of being “one for the other”, as expressed in *Song of Songs* (*Song 2, 16; 6: 3*).

The noun – covenant – does not fully convey the Hebraic meaning (*berit*) or the Greek (*diatheke*), which express it more strongly: oath, promise, a solemn assurance, and which only

¹⁰⁹ For example, the words: Beloved, seek, drawn, wound of love, love as strong as death... and so on.

¹¹⁰ According to St. Paul, Christians are those who have triumphed in the matter of Jesus Christ. Through His Good News they, as if, fill the whole world with a pleasant fragrance. *But thanks be to God, who in Christ always leads in triumph, and through us spreads the fragrance of the knowledge of him everywhere. For we are the aroma of Christ to God among those who are being saved and among those who are perishing... (2Cor 2: 14-15)*. In *Letter to Ephesians* (cf. *Eph 5: 2*) Jesus Christ’s sacrifice is also a pleasant fragrance, as are the offerings of believers, *a fragrant offering, a sacrifice acceptable and pleasing to God (Phil 4: 18)*.

¹¹¹ *Jeremiah 31: 33* conveys the basic meaning of the word “covenant” in the Bible: *I will be their God, and they shall be my people*. The Bible speaks of two main covenants: the Old and the New, more often called the Old and the New Testaments. The covenant with Noah and the whole of creation was a pledge on the part of God alone, when He promised to never again send a flood upon the earth. The first covenant with Abraham was a similar one. It could not have been broken as only God had made the pledge, He Who is always faithful, not man, who turned out to be faithless. The covenant through Moses on Mount Sinai was a different covenant, renewed by Joshua and the people of Israel in Shechem. God promised to protect them, but in exchange he expected obedience to the Law. Beginning with Hosea (*Hos 1-3*), the prophets proclaimed a different model of the covenant, that is, a marriage contract. The change from a formal “political” relationship to a more personal, friendly one is significant. Hence a violation of the covenant was defined as “adultery” (cf. *Ezek 16*). Finally Jeremiah and then Ezekiel proposed a “new covenant”, even more familiar, more personal. God Himself and His Spirit enter the heart of man, so transforming it that the bonds of love and the covenant never cease (see *Jer 31:3*). This “new covenant” of the Holy Spirit in the creature, written into his heart, extolled by Jeremiah, was recalled by Jesus, Who linked it with His redemptive sacrifice, when He said at the Last Supper: *This cup which is poured out for you is the new covenant in my blood (Lk 22: 20)*. A whole passage from *Isaiah* (8: 8-12) is quoted in *Hebrews* to exalt Christ, the mediator of: ... *a new and better covenant*.

in some cases describe a mutual obligation. “*Berit*”, from “*barah*” (cut), is one of the most important words in the Bible. This term “attempts” to convey the essence of the relationship between the Lord and His people. Without doubt God has priority, He Who takes the initiative. Hence we can speak here rather of a promise, an oath, of God’s “testament”, to which man responds by accepting that gift, but frequently too, unfortunately, by a lack of permanence in showing gratitude, and by infidelity. Hence, starting with Hosea (chapters 1-3), the prophets speak of another covenant, comparing it to a marriage contract. Subsequent prophets, Jeremiah and Ezekiel, propose a “new covenant”, yet more personal. God Himself, with His own Spirit, penetrates the heart of man, so transforming it that the bonds of love and the covenant never cease: [...] *I will make a new covenant with the house of Israel [...] (Jer 31: 31 - 33)*. Let us examine how Blessed Mary saw the covenant with regard to her own life:

*The other grace that the Lord Jesus deigned to give me was the recognition, and the request of the Lord Jesus to deign to make an **eternal covenant** with me, to confirm it, that is, that He deign to give me the firm faith and trust, based solely on His mercy, that I am His, that I now belong to Him for evermore, and that, in giving myself to Him, I might not belong to anyone, to the world, to people, to myself, but solely to Him; to my soul’s Lord and Beloved (Diary 2, 68).*

The fact that Blessed Mary called the Congregation’s constitution the *Law of Love* – Italian, *Patto dell’Amore*, English, *Covenant of Love*, testifies to how important the issue was to her.¹¹² She understood that Jesus is a particular “sphere” of this covenant, as God-Man. He Himself is the Covenant and the Beloved; a “YES” from God to people of all times. In completely offering Himself up for us, He also became the representative of the human “yes” to God. Blessed Mary understood that, from that moment - Jesus’ “YES” on the Cross - marriage, on the part of man, is accomplished in the passion and death of Christ... So the Cross is a form of dependence, and a sign of God’s absolute love as well as of man’s: *for God so loved the world that he gave his only Son, that whoever believes in him should not perish but have eternal life (Jn 3: 16)*.

This unique covenant between God and man is evident in Blessed Mary’s writings in two expressions, which are repeated like a refrain in her *Diary*.¹¹³

¹¹² Let us recall this important reference concerning the name and its deeper meaning: *We call our Constitution the Law of Love. We thereby recall the truth of having been summoned in love to serve in love. We acknowledge that we know the Beloved’s voice, inviting us to a special intimacy, and that we desire to respond to it with our whole being. Thus our rule is first and foremost an expression of love and thereafter a set of regulations... See Law of Love, Constitutions ... op. cit., Rome 2002, p. 8.*

¹¹³ We can find another example – “sign” of the covenant - in a testimony left by a young Frances in her *Autobiography*. She recalls that when she was afflicted by a serious illness, Fr. Leander unexpectedly informed her that the Lord was calling her to a religious vocation, and that it was the will of God that she be the founder of a new religious family. She describes this, one of the most important events of her life, thus: *Hearing all that I was beside myself with joy (...). To me it was new proof that the Lord Jesus reveals various things to him. So I gave myself up for anything that might happen, joyfully and happily, and when Father departed, I was alone in a rapture of love for my Lord. I cut my hand, but so that nobody could see it, and with my own blood, wanting to seal my total devotion, I wrote these words: “Jesus’ forever. M.F.” (A, 176)*. These words - now somewhat faded after more than a hundred years - are still a valuable testimony to us... This singular “seal” of the covenant with Jesus is in the Generalate House Archives in Rome.

The first is a Pauline statement: *it is no longer I who live, but Christ who lives in me* (Gal 2: 20). So this event is not a superficial encounter, an external one. That which follows can be compared to a kind of “explosion” of mysteries and baptismal promises that are “rooted” in the life of a Christian. The experience of the encounter of the Apostle of Nations with Christ, which became a kind of model for those graces, was in a way one of Blessed Mary’s experiences. She points out that “Christ’s hour must strike” in the life of every Sister of Nazareth too, and that every sister “ought to fall madly in love” with Jesus, so as to - like Paul- concentrate all her activities around Him:

The Lord gave me to sense that as if a new period had now begun in my spiritual life, another phase, a life in the Lord Jesus. This meant that I ought to completely vanish, perish, be immersed in Christ (...). Fr. Anthony, to whom I gave an account of the state of my soul, told me today that from the time that the Lord Jesus the Good Shepherd, by His grace, had led me to His fold, to His love – from that time on the Lord has been within me. Now, however, it is necessary that I be in Him. Not only be with the Lord Jesus, but in Him, that I live in Him, that He be First, always and everywhere. I am to follow Him always, look at Him, love Him, feel, think and work in Him and through Him. In this is that annihilation of my whole being, so as to live in the Lord Jesus, so as to aspire to that which is in the Church’s introit reading today about St. Paul of the Cross: “I am alive; yet it is no longer I, but Christ living in me” (Gal 2:20). Just as the Lord Jesus had hitherto come and drawn my soul to Himself, so it was now necessary that I go to Him, live Him, and in Him. This alone is a wonderful life, the life of love. Love is always free; the Lord Jesus never compels a soul, He leaves it its freedom, its free choice, so that it might voluntarily give itself to love, because love is – freedom (Diary I, 41-42).

At a certain moment in her life, Blessed Mary became aware of the true state of her soul, its beauty and dignity, its subtlety and freedom, which flowed from the *Covenant of Love*.

Another theme in her writings is the declaration: *He is in me, and I am in Him*, which runs through her writing like a golden thread. This declaration is a kind of paraphrase of the already quoted verse - *Song of Songs 2:16* – but which also refers to the Johannine verses: 6: 56; 14: 23; 15: 3-4. The above passages from the Gospel according to St. John were important to her, for she quoted them repeatedly. She meditated on them at morning prayer.¹¹⁴ They were a grace of contemplation.¹¹⁵ She also scrupulously wrote down – based on them- Fr. Lechert’s teaching:

“You still love the Lord Jesus too humanly. You are too attached to your affections, whereas He frequently deprives you of them for a time, so that your love might be purer, more spiritual. He wants you to be united with Him without these affections (...) believing in His presence in your soul (...) Your soul will then yet more closely unite with the Lord(...). There will then be one and not two. The soul becomes ONE with the Lord Jesus (...), founded on Him, as well as on faith, hope and charity. His words are life, and whatever He says – He accomplishes. And He Himself said:

¹¹⁴ Cf. *Diary 2*, 10.

¹¹⁵ Cf. *Diary 2*, 38. The issue of the place and role of the word of God in Blessed Mary’s contemplative prayer and mystical experiences – because of its importance and length – will be presented in a future notebook.

‘Whoever eats my flesh and drinks my blood lives in me and I live in that person (Jn 6:56), and, Anyone who loves me will keep my word, and my Father will love him, and we shall come to him and make a home in him’ [Jn14: 23] (Diary I, 24-25).¹¹⁶

It is necessary to underline that the unity between Jesus and His disciples, described in the Gospel, is connected – in the last two cases - with the effectiveness of Christ’s words. All these texts, so important to Mother Mary, became, so to speak, a “part” of her life, her prayers, her mystical experiences. We shall return to them in following works. Meanwhile, I invite you – with Mother Mary – for a moment of contemplation on the Gospel image of Jesus the Good Shepherd...

The Good Shepherd image is present in the whole history and spiritual sphere of the Church: in the liturgy, the writings of the Church Fathers (Augustine, Ambrose and Jerome etc.), in the writings of theologians (for example, Thomas Aquinas), not to mention its cultural heritage (art, sculpture and music).

The Bible image of a shepherd is depicted with a rich range of meanings. In the Old Testament a shepherd’s activities are often used to explain the actions of God;¹¹⁷ they refer to God Himself – Jahwe.¹¹⁸ We can find more detailed descriptions or images of a shepherd, protecting a defenceless flock, in *Psalms* 23 and in *Ezekiel* 34. The image of a shepherd is one of the motifs that is preferred by the prophets (for example, *Is* 40: 11; *Jer* 23: 1-4; 31: 10). Initially this figure was used to depict Israel as God’s flock, which was led through the desert, and the following stages in history, to the fulfillment of God’s redemptive plans in regard to all nations (*Is* 49: 13). This motif also expresses the personal relation of the Israelites with God. As Jahwe is Israel’s only true shepherd, the Old Testament usually applies the title to rulers in a negative sense, though there are exceptions here also, for example, David. The intervention promised by God is realized in the Messianic preaching of the mysterious shepherd, of whom God will make – according to His Heart - a new David. Thanks to Him, Israel will “be saved”, and live in safety (cf. *Jer* 23: 5). In the New Testament, the Synoptic writers focus on Jesus’ pastoral mercy and forgiveness (see: *Mt* 18: 12-14; *Mk* 6: 34; *Lk* 15: 4-6). John the Evangelist’s “portrait” of the Good Shepherd is the most radical. His work still fascinates us by its profound originality: he has only one Shepherd (he does not name others), and He lays down His life for His sheep. And what is important, Christ Himself also thus described Himself (cf. *Jn* 10: 1-29).¹¹⁹ He says of Himself, “I am”¹²⁰ the shepherd..., and so, the one announced by the prophets.

The Hebrew word *roceh* – shepherd - means guide, but also companion; it comes from the root “*rch*”, meaning both feed as well as lead, care for... The Greek language (New Testament) defines a shepherd by the word *poimen*, always in a positive sense, and, as in the

¹¹⁶ See also: *Diary I*, 75-76.

¹¹⁷ For example: *Gen* 48: 15; 49: 24; *Psalms* 23: 1; 79: 13; 80: 2; 95: 7; 100: 3; *Is* 40: 11.

¹¹⁸ In the Old Testament God is described as a shepherd only four times. The image of a shepherd also appears in the consolation prophecies during the bondage in Babylon; so it particularly refers to the Messiah Who is to come... In the New Testament, God the Father is nowhere directly called a shepherd. So here this name is synonymous with Christ.

¹¹⁹ Christ is also called: ... *the great shepherd of the sheep* (*Heb* 13: 20), ...*Shepherd and Guardian*... (*1 Pet* 2: 25), ... *chief Shepherd*... (*1Pet* 5: 4), ... [*guiding*] *them to the springs of living water* (*Rev* 7: 17).

¹²⁰ He relates the name *Jesus* to the name Jahwe as well as *I am*..., Christ’s description of Himself.

Old Testament, here too – in a figurative sense. However, Jesus described Himself as the "Good" Shepherd; the Greek, *kalos* (beautiful, good) here, however, does not indicate superficial beauty or goodness. In the Greek culture of those times, it rather indicated perfection of being; in this case, being a shepherd (that is, the best, the one that most perfectly performs this function).¹²¹

Blessed Mary, not knowing biblical Greek, felt this original meaning intuitively, for, to her, a "Good Shepherd" was the One who "took" her: *to the heavenly fold in His arms* (*Diary 1*, 37). He accompanied her throughout the whole of her earthly journey: from her earliest years, when she discovered His good Countenance in the church in Żdzarski,¹²² to when she used His symbolic "Name" – as a predicate –¹²³ in her religious life, to a profound, spiritual penetration of this Mystery, and to being, "in Its image and likeness", at the service of the Congregation and of the world...¹²⁴ He is the "source of mercy and love" (cf. *Diary 2*, 180), her "Good Shepherd, Saviour and Redeemer", Who "waited for the lost lamb", and did not leave it "to fall prey to the enemy of (her) soul" (cf. *Diary 2*, 83). So, to Mother Mary, the figure of the Good Shepherd is intrinsically connected with the attribute of merciful love, as well as the mysteries of Salvation and Redemption. Y. Congar (like St. Faustina Kowalska) sees mercy as the highest, a kingly, attribute of God.¹²⁵ John Paul II confirms this in his teaching, underlining: ... *in Christ and through Christ, God also becomes especially visible in His mercy; that is to say, there is emphasized that attribute of the divinity which the Old Testament, using various concepts and terms, already defined as "mercy." Christ confers on the whole of the Old Testament tradition about God's mercy a definitive meaning. Not only does He speak of it and explain it by the use of comparisons and parables, but above all He Himself makes it incarnate and personifies it. He Himself, in a certain sense, is mercy. To the person who sees it in Him - and finds it in Him - God becomes "visible" in a particular way as the Father who is rich in mercy* (*Eph 2: 4*) (*DM*, 2)

God's mercy, to Mother Mary and the Polish pope, is the manifestation of His love for man on his "journey", burdened with human weaknesses (cf. *DM*, 13). Hence she often links it with the Good Shepherd seeking lost sheep.¹²⁶ So it is with great intuition that she interprets the "programme" of the Good Shepherd, Who, when He started "shepherding", revealed His redemptive work by announcing: *The Spirit of the Lord is upon me, because he has appointed me to preach good news to the poor. He has sent me to proclaim release to the captives and recovering of sight to the blind, to set at liberty those who are oppressed, to proclaim the acceptable year of the Lord* (*Lk 4: 18-19*).¹²⁷ Blessed Mary, numbering herself among the "flock" of "sinners", "the lost", recalls:

¹²¹ Cf. X. Leon-Dufour, *Lettura dell' evangelio secondo Giovanni*, San Paolo, Cinisello Balsamo 1990, p. 656.

¹²² One of the frescoes in the church in Żdzarski depicts Jesus as the Good Shepherd.

¹²³ Mary of Jesus the Good Shepherd.

¹²⁴ This subject has been gone into in depth in a master's dissertation, see M. Uścińowicz (Sr. M. Christiana), *The Idea of a Good Shepherd in the Life and Writings of Frances Siedliska*, ATK, Warsaw 1998.

¹²⁵ Other theologians also underline this, as do the Fathers of the Church, for example, St. Augustine, St. Thomas Aquinas, St. Fulgentius and St. Ildefonsus.

¹²⁶ This is an obvious reference to the "lost sheep" parable (*Lk 15: 1-7*). See also *Lk 5: 32*. Comparing a sinner to a lost sheep comes from the Old Testament tradition (cf. *Ps 119; Is 53: 6*).

¹²⁷ St. Luke emphasizes this very strongly (cf. *Lk 5: 31-32*).

Today, during a meditation about the Good Shepherd, Who feeds and leads his lambs, my whole life stood before my eyes: how He followed me, how the Lord sought me; and I continually fled from Him and finally left Him altogether, lived without loving Him. The Lord Jesus gave me to weep a great deal. I cried over the fact that I had offended the Lord God, that I had wounded His love. Ah, Lord, I owe everything to You; You are my Saviour! (Diary 2, 21).

Her remorse “cannot be measured by the size of the sin, but by the size of her understanding of what sin is. The profundity of the remorse does not lie in just the revulsion to sin, but in the fact that she profoundly understood Who the Offended was, Who the Father was, Who so loves us”.¹²⁸ Only those who were lost are saved- only a sinner can be justified.¹²⁹ For Jesus said: (...) *know the truth, and the truth will make you free (Jn 8: 32).*

The mutual **familiarity of Shepherd and sheep** is another Johannine trait that appears in her portrait of the Good Shepherd: My sheep hear my voice, and I know them (*Jn 10: 27*). Like Mary Magdalene, Frances Siedliska recognised her Shepherd’s voice (*Jn 20: 16*), and decided to follow Him. To her, hours of adoration were personal encounters with the Good Shepherd in the silent glades of her heart. She describes them thus:

Over the last few days, Lord, virtually always during adoration, You inwardly presented Yourself to me as the Good Shepherd, and You roused me to adore, worship and praise You as the Good Shepherd, Who lay down His life for His sheep (cf. Jn 10: 11). But above all, my Lord, You were and are a Good, the best Shepherd, for when I, through my wretchedness, withdrew from You, You did not reject me, leave me to myself, but You sought me, saved me from doom, delivered me from the abyss, and You brought me to Your sheepfold on Your shoulders (cf. Lk 15: 4-6). My Lord! O, [grant that] everyone might come to know You; that I might be able to speak of the wonders of your goodness and love (Diary 2, 166).

This beautiful, prayerful reflection contains the most important aspects of the “theology” of the Gospel image of the Good Shepherd. Her **confessions** were a kind of return to the loving and healing arms of the Merciful Shepherd. She notes, for example: *O Lord, You showed Yourself to be a truly Good Shepherd at that confession, for You accepted a lost sheep, and healed its wounds. You showed me all the love of Your Heart (Diary 2, 264).* She changed her retreats into “the better part,” at the feet of the Eternal Shepherd:

Immediately after the first meditation, about the beginnings of man, though I knew these things, and had frequently heard them, I was greatly moved by the love the Lord God has for us. I thought that the Lord God so loved me, yet I do not love Him so, that I lack love for my God. I felt very much drawn by the Lord Jesus’ love and, being in the chapel, I turned to Our Lord Who was concealed in the Blessed Sacrament. The Lord Jesus appeared to me in my soul as the Good Shepherd carrying a lost, injured and impoverished lamb in His arms. And in spirit I fell to the Lord Jesus’ feet, and said: “This is going to be a retreat of love at the feet of the Good Shepherd”, for my soul needs the Good Shepherd – the Lord Jesus, after so many temptations, struggles, falls. My wretchedness can only find calm, quiet and refreshment at the Lord Jesus’ feet, for

¹²⁸ M. Uścińowicz (Sr. M. Christiana), op. cit., p. 34.

¹²⁹ Cf. T. Merton, *No Man is an Island*, Kraków 1989, p. 318.

the Lord Jesus is that centre in which all the soul's powers find their nourishment, their satiation, the satisfaction of their needs (Diary 2, 91).

Perhaps we should, at her example, sometimes change our yearly meeting with the Lord into “a glade of His pastoral graces”? Perhaps it is worth thinking about retreats with the Good Shepherd, His Face wiped clean of the dust of time, engraved with love in our Mother's heart...?

For He became the invigorating “centre” of her daily life, which she ardently described on the *Sunday of the Good Shepherd* (May the 9th, 1886):

This is a very precious and festive day to me – firstly, because Father, at the renewal of my vows at Christmas, 1884, bestowed this title on me, this name “Mary of the Lord Jesus the Good Shepherd”; and that year – I think it was in March – our house in Rome was given to the special care of the Good Shepherd, and dedicated to Him. Hence my Lord is, was, and [I trust], will always be the Good Shepherd to me. Because throughout this week my Lord, in a special way, gave me to think of Him as the Good Shepherd, I was pleased and glad about the proximity of that day (Diary 2, 167-168).

From then on the Lord Jesus, the Good Shepherd, called Mary ... **by name**. He took the mother house under His care, the first community of Sisters, and **leads them** (cf. *Jn* 10: 3). They now know His voice and they follow Him, in small groups, to other “pastures”, beyond Italy... That which the Gospel defines as “knowing” and “friendship” are elements of our little “Nazareth”. The biblical *jada* - “to know” - has a very wide range of meanings: “to notice”, “to see”, “experience”, “sense”, “care for”, “abide”... So its meaning goes way beyond a “European” understanding of “to know”, which is limited particularly to knowledge, the intellect. So the word *know*, in biblical language, can be translated as an *inner belonging*. Jesus Himself compared this mutual familiarity of shepherd and flock to His relationship with the Heavenly Father. Hence the most beautiful model of the relations of the Holy Trinity - most fully replicated in the Holy Family, and which is to us a special “map” on the paths of the Sisters of Nazareth - encompasses the experience of the biblical “knowing” of Shepherd and sheep... This familiarity is not passive, or a one off, but it assumes a permanent development, progress, that leads to a constant, an ever deeper union.¹³⁰ Hence Jesus, full of conviction, speaks of sheep as “**My...**” (*Jn* 10: 14).¹³¹

However, that which should express the sheep's response (to the mutual knowing) is contained in two other words: “**hear**” and “**follow**”. These verbs not only evident in the Gospel pericope (*Jn* 10: 27-30), but they also mark out two fundamental currents in Blessed Mary's response. To her, the Good Shepherd is the One Who speaks to her, “feeds and leads her” (cf. *Diary* 2, 21). To follow Him means, to His “sheep”, to **do His will**... A reflection in her *Diary* speaks of this (March the 16th, 1899 – Good Shepherd Sunday):

You know everything, O Lord, You are leading everything, directing everything. O, what happiness to be and to live under Your eye, to be under Your guidance, O Lord, my Good Shepherd! My Lord, exposed today on the altar in our chapel – You were again a Good Shepherd to me; You calmed my soul, You rooted out

¹³⁰ Cf. R. Bartnicki, *The Biblical Image of the Good Shepherd*, HD 51 (1982) no. 1, p. 43.

¹³¹ The Greek pronoun “*ihthios*” means “undeniable property”.

of it the remains of the pain (which still overwhelmed me deep inside), and You poured in the oil of Your grace, which healed that which was too lively, not subject to You, not united with Your Most Holy will (Diary 2, 389-390).

In reality, Blessed Mary declared that which the “biblical nation” testified to: *God (...) who has led me all my life long to this day ... (Gen 48: 15).*

Israel, during the exodus from Egypt, the pilgrimage across the desert, experienced the constant care of God. Mother Mary’s “deserts” of prayer and dark nights, a stage of trials of faith and inner purgation are experienced in the light the same biblical faith. Our Foundress turns to her Shepherd both in the dark valleys of her life, at moments of inner struggle, and in the blooming gardens of her heart. Her reflection (July the 26th, 1885) is an eloquent testimony of those spiritual struggles:

O my Lord, (...), what a terrible day it was for me! I felt ill, no doubt because of the struggles, and I had to lie down. The most dreadful feelings: revolt, malice, pride and self-will seized my soul; one step and I would have destroyed all God’s work...¹³²(...). At one moment I felt as if I was on the edge of an abyss. Faith showed me the Lord God, Whom I would lose forever if I did not follow His road. And I always had the feeling and faith (...). But temptation lured my will to acquiesce to the loss of God, showing me that was not true, that there was no eternal life, all in order that I might not condemn myself, nor give up my plans. But the Lord Jesus, the Good Shepherd, my Saviour and Redeemer, waited for the lost lamb. He did not leave me to fall prey to the enemy of my soul (...). And I learnt through experience that even if the soul were to be raised to the third heaven with St. Paul [cf. 2Cor 12:2], and lived in the closest relationship with the Lord Jesus, this should not be trusted, for it cannot count on itself at all. That was the grace of the Lord Jesus, while counting on oneself was the source of corruption and malice. I learnt that neither faith nor hope nor love – are in our souls of ourselves; that our will is evil and corrupt and inclined to evil, and that – to follow the Lord Jesus and His law there is but need of His grace, which would make it repent and incline it to the Lord God (Diary 2, 83).

So Jesus is the exodus Shepherd, the “Gate” of freedom.¹³³ He says of Himself: *I am the door of the sheep (Jn 10: 7)*. It is through Him that shepherds go to the sheep,¹³⁴ the sheep to the sheepfold... Jesus’ Heart is the “gate”... H. U. von Balthasar wrote of Him: “His *I* is not the subject to concentrate on, but basically prayer. It is the prayer: *Abba! Father!*” Jesus receives everything from His Father, and He is profoundly aware that His Father loves Him. That love fills His Heart, hence It is pure and obedient, whilst Jesus’ childlike trust enables Him to completely strip Himself. Jesus speaks of this attitude: ***learn from me; for I am gentle and lowly in heart*** [Mt 11: 29]. Blessed Mary, via this Way and Gate, became a Shepherd herself. Of course, as we read a moment ago, not without a struggle...

¹³² This reflection concerns the difficult beginnings of establishing the foundation Congregation in America. Blessed Mary confesses: *...temptation encouraged me to return to Poland together with the sisters; to go to the Archbishop and tell him that the sisters could not stay here.*

¹³³ To a person from the Near East, the image of a **gate** has a positive connotation. Hence it appears quite frequently in the Gospels, for example: Mt 7: 13-14; 16: 18. A gate in a wall had a special meaning for shepherds and their flocks; an entrance to a safe place.

¹³⁴ Jesus passed on his pastoral authority to the one who loved Him “more than others”. He entrusts His sheep only to the one who loved Him most. In passing on His authority, He said to Peter: ***Follow me!*** And to follow Jesus is to accept the cross and be prepared to lay down one’s life. That is the meaning of Jesus’ words: ***I am the Gate.***

Jesus comes as a servant and shepherd: *I came that (...) [the sheep] may have life, and have it abundantly (Jn 10: 10)*. Such is God's pedagogy, and the pastoral artistry of the Son of God. He does not limit Himself to counting the sheep, but calls each one of us "by name". He surrounds each one of us with solicitude, pointing to the value of a human person. This happens because this "knowing", which links, unites Jesus with His sheep, is Love. The sheep belong to the Shepherd, as He lays down His life for them, and they know His voice and follow the One Who gives new life. And He speaks to us today: ***I am the good shepherd; I know my own and my own know me, as the Father knows me and I know the Father; and I lay down my life for the sheep [Jn 10: 14-15]***. And He addresses His Father: ***The glory which thou hast given me I have given to them, that they may be one as we are one, I in them and thou in me ... [Jn 17: 22-23]***.

In Mother Mary's reflection, the Good Shepherd is also the one who ***"loves all... lambs"*** (*Diary 2*, 244). In writing these words, she no doubt had St. John's text in mind: ***And I have other sheep, that are not of this fold; I must bring them also, and they will heed my voice. So there shall be one flock, one shepherd (Jn 10: 16)***. So our Foundress sensed a universal dimension to this shepherding; God gave His Only Begotten Son for the whole world, not just for the Israeli nation (*Jn 3: 16; Jer 23: 3; 31: 8*), and not just for the members of the Catholic Church.¹³⁵

Yielding to an inner urge, Blessed Mary sought the ultimate meaning of life and death, meditating on that which John the Evangelist wanted to convey when speaking of Jesus as the Good Shepherd. That declaration by Jesus Himself assumes a particular meaning in the context of His sacrifice on the Cross. So, to Mother Mary, the Good Shepherd is the one who ***lays down his life for the sheep (Jn 10: 11) (Diary 2, 1660)***, and so ***He heals [sins] by His own Blood (Diary 2, 16)***, but also the One Who ***wounding this lamb (...) with what a most precious wound – the wound of His love, (Diary 2, 16)***, in order to ***raise (her) to a new life (Diary2 , 244)***.

So, Blessed Mary discerned the remarkable work of God Himself in her heart, which assumes a dramatic form by the fact that, in Jesus Christ, God Himself seeks the *lost sheep*: her, you and me, the whole of humanity, lost and suffering. In Jesus' death on the Cross, God turns against Himself in offering Himself up so as to raise man and save him – it is love in its most radical form. Mother Mary's intent gaze at Christ's pierced side reflects that which St. John the Apostle speaks of in a brilliant way, as does the splendid encyclical, ***God Is Love***, by Benedict the XVIth.

So John the Evangelist "conceals" the paschal dimension of the Incarnation in the image of the Good Shepherd; He lays down His life "for the sheep", not speaking here of "my", "other" – but for all... The attitude of the Son – Shepherd, throughout the course of His whole mission, based on the mutual love of Father and Son, is finally, to Mother Mary, the basis of faith, that He will raise her and us to a new life as she wrote in the above reflection. And that on the way to the Father, He will care for His own sheep - throughout the history of the Church – so that no one might snatch them out of His hands (cf. *Jn 10: 28*). Hence the prophetic announcements about the Good Shepherd splendidly came true in Jesus Christ.

¹³⁵ Many testimonies of conversions to the Catholic Faith have been preserved, the fruit of M. Mary's apostolic work (they include many women of Jewish descent).

Meditating on His Face, Pope Benedict the XVIth wrote: *In accord with this image, concern for the weak is a task of a just ruler. Hence one could accept that from the very beginning the image of Christ the Good Shepherd is the Gospel of Christ the King, which helps one to understand Christ's reign.*¹³⁶ So the subject of the Kingdom of Heaven, so important in the life and teaching of Mother Mary, is connected with her Beloved Shepherd. This issue requires more elaboration; (perhaps in a further *Notebook*); I have not taken it into consideration in this work.

Blessed Mary fully understood this vocation and teaching, expressed in her attitude of complete service, in giving herself to Nazareth and the world. To her, the Good Shepherd was a model and a strength in being a loving Mother and Superior, as well as in bravely undertaking the challenges of her time and the needs of the Church.

To sum up this subject, it is necessary to stress that the most significant images of Jesus in Blessed Mary's writings, the Beloved and the Good Shepherd, were equally representative for other saints (for example, the Spanish mystic, St. John of the Cross) in expressing their own experiences of God, revealed in the light of the word of God. To the great Carmelite saint, as well as to Mother Mary, contemplation of the image of the Good Shepherd and the Betrothed was the way to unveil the invisible and incomprehensible Countenance of God. The efficacy of the Word of God, strengthened by the symbolic profoundness of those images, arouses sensitivity and emotions within those that contemplate them, and leads to a trusting relationship with God, so solicitous, so in love with man. The objectivity of this experience seems to be confirmed and clearly expressed by Mother Mary in the context of Gospel references that speak of God's love and mercy. This arouses admiration in us, which opens our hearts to the truth of how great God's love and desires in regard to man are...

The symbols presented herein, and the many other minor ones in Mother Mary's writings, have been brought closer to us in a beautiful stylistic setting. Sincerely expressed, and illuminated by the power of the word of God, they are like a vast "constellation" of her spiritual experiences. They are not only a beautiful, but also a vivid testimony to her wealth of references - theological and anthropological - drawn from the boundless and inexhaustible spiritual strength of the Eternal and Loving Word...

Finally, it is necessary to clarify that certain figures, images, ideas or issues, so essential to our spirituality, are absent here: like the already mentioned "Kingdom of God's Love, the figures of Mary and Joseph (the Holy Family), like the so important subject (Mother's last words in her spiritual testament) of the "new Commandment", love of God and neighbour, faith and hope, God's will, concealment, prayer, and so on. They have been omitted because they are of such great importance that they need to be presented in a wider, deeper form.

Subjects for personal reflection:

Blessed Mary managed to interpret her own "history of salvation", comparing its stages to biblical events, symbols and figures:

- Which of the biblical events is a reflection of my own experiences?
- Which of the figures in Holy Scripture are particularly close to me? Why?

¹³⁶ Benedict XVI, *Jesus of Nazareth*, vol. I, Krakow 2007, p. 229.

- Which image, symbol or biblical term, could express the present state of my soul, my relationship with the Lord? Why?

A FINAL WORD

The present times again reveal the need for a spirituality rooted in the word of God. For the Bible is like an icon which testifies to a hidden God; *it is the presence and absence of God in the "kenosis" of the Word*¹³⁷ a sign, a reflection of a dialogue between God and Man. The response to God's revelation is simplicity of faith, the desire to listen to, and to contemplate the word of God, to faithfully translate it into tangible deeds.

Blessed Frances Siedliska's words and deeds testify to her complete disposability. Our Foundress' fascination and love for the word of God are testified to by numerous quotes, allusions and other biblical references in her writings, which are something more than a book. They are a gift and a testimony, an "X-ray" of her soul. She wrote them as if "from the inside", not concentrating too much on the numerous events of passing days, months, years... Comments on this subject are concise and modest. However, we can point out certain "intuitions" which directed Mother Mary's reading and interpretation of the Bible. One can define them as a certain kind of "exegetical" norm, which she discovered through her experiences in life, illuminated by the light of the word of God, as well as the "mysticism" of the Bible itself, read together with the whole community of the Church. These criteria are surprisingly convergent with some of the rules of biblical interpretation in the *Second Vatican Council's Dogmatic Constitution, Dei Verbum*. For Blessed Mary, when explaining verses of Holy Scripture, differentiates the theological sense from that discovered by her as useful for her own life as well as for the lives of the Sisters of Nazareth. To her, the word of God is the ultimate criterion of truth in interpreting her own experiences and that of the age. To her, revelation is a special light at times of trial, enabling her to experience her 'nights of purgation' in a conscious and heroic way. The Gospel is like a "mirror" that verifies the authenticity of her love for God and neighbour. On her journey, deep within herself, she discovers the value of the Bible as Divine truth, the truth that is God; the truth that, according to *Dei Verbum*, *God wanted put into sacred writings for the sake of salvation* (DV, 11). She superbly senses that, in the biblical dimension, it is the revelation of God's mystery, His redemptive plans.

Her writings [*Autobiography, Spiritual Diary*, volumes 1 and 2, *Selection of Letters, Letters to Fr. Lechert, Conferences, Talks with the Lord Jesus*], penetrated by a shaft of biblical light, full of symbols, images, events and figures which fascinated her, reveal those mysterious "rooms" of her heart to us, where she – like Mary – *kept all these things, pondering them... (Lk 2:19)*. According to Mother Mary they "belong" to the truth which Holy Scripture expresses; they "return" in her recollections and reflections as examples of important attitudes and dispositions for the spiritual life. They also help her to understand the deep meaning of spiritual dynamism and development. So Frances sees her life as a journey with God, as her own micro – history of Redemption. The symbols and images used by her also "reach the roots" of her experiences, hence they are familiar to all. They suggest much more than they signify. They move the sensitivity, and stimulate the reader's intellect in an

¹³⁷ Cf. E. Bianchi, *La Parola che costuisce la Comunita*, in "In principio la parola". *Scrittura e sviluppo spirituale*, "Fiamma Viva", Teresianum, Roma 1992, pp. 189-190.

evocative way. They encourage us to interpret each of them anew in our own lives. So her own personal history, expressed by the suggestiveness of images, not an accidental constellation of symbols, expresses the process of her spiritual development.

To her, *communion* and *covenant* were correlative with God's "presence" and "abode" in a human heart. Frances' prayers were a personal and complete response to God's word of love. Holy Scripture primarily revealed the Face of Merciful Love to her. Love that overcomes nothingness, that turns it into a fire. God is pure love: anticipatory, self-giving, joyful in forgiving, that attracts and transforms a soul in its life-giving flame. The word of God, to the extent it revealed Bl. Mary's human weakness and the vast ontological gulf of her being, brought about the *need of trust* and the attitude of self-sacrifice in her heart, that is, the life of theological hope, which assumed an authentic fortitude in proportion to the "clearing up" of God's mysteries. The images closest to her heart - Jesus the Good Shepherd and the Betrothed - are symbolic expressions of God's revelation, which prompt her to confidently entrust herself to God-Love. Blessed Mary's biblical meditations not only focused on the Gospel, but they initiated her into the redemptive mysteries of the *Incarnation, Jesus' Childhood, His Passion and Resurrection* as well as the *Eucharist*. They penetrated her soul and spirituality with the light of grace. So Blessed Mary points to that which Benedict the XVIth expressed in his apostolic exhortation, *Verbum Domini*, on the inseparable connection between the word of God and Jesus (cf. *VD*, 18) and the Eucharist, where it manifests its particular effectiveness (cf. *VD*, 65-66).

Both documents, *Dei Verbum* and *Verbum Domini*, remind us that Holy Scripture must be read and interpreted in the light of the Holy Spirit (cf. *DV*, 12; *VD*, 15), as without the effective work of the *Spirit of Truth* (*Jn* 14: 16) *one cannot understand the Lord's words* (*VD*, 24). To read the Bible according to the Spirit, is to read it with the "eyes of the Church"; it is an ecclesial reading (*DV*, 8). To Mother Mary, the word of God was the *source of strength for her faith and the criterion of infallible truth as regards the teaching of the Church*. She felt herself to be a daughter of the real Church; a community of saints and sinners. She fervently desired to respond to the Church's challenges and needs, to live in accord with her teaching, seeking the advice of spiritual directors and theologians. She strongly admonishes sisters: *Let us adhere to the Gospel spirit, the spirit of the Church, the one certainty, the one safeguard. Apart from that, error and falsehood can be found in the best of things* (*M*, 54).

The word of God also stimulated her *pedagogical activities* in "Nazareth" communities as well as other human communities; the novitiate, apostolic work that embraced children, youth and families. That extraordinary effectiveness of God's word could only be liberated in one who had a living relationship with Christ.

An experience of God, when it is like a rushing stream, becomes the word of God, that is, a testimony. Blessed Mary herself thus became a spiritual mistress, an *echo* of the Gospel. She turned to the word of God in all the decisive moments of her own spiritual path so as to discern: falls and progress, the "heights" of her sanctity; the desire and aim of her human and Christian vocation; charismas for her religious life and the spirituality of the Congregation that she founded.

This outline of the Foundress' biblical spirituality is but a fraction of the wealth of her legacy. Other essential subjects from Holy Scripture, like prayer, the spirituality of the Holy Family, the Kingdom of God, require further, more extensive studies.

So the spirituality of the Sisters of Nazareth is a pointer and an invitation to a more perfect life, the vitality of which is constantly drawn from the Bible. And even if, to the majority of Christians, Blessed Frances' legacy is still "hidden", the truth is that it has been "illuminated" by Divine light in the firmament of XIXth century spirituality. Extracted from "under a bushel", it is a testimony and a path not less actual or important than that of other known saints (for example, St. Therese of the Child Jesus, Blessed Charles de Foucauld and Servant of God Francis Blachnicki), or religious movements that draw their strength from the word of God (like Focolare and the Catholic Charismatic Renewal). May the word of God, the Word Incarnate, Who is the Way, the Truth and the Life permeate our words and deeds as it did in the life of Frances Siedliska.

Many thanks to Mother Jana Zawieja, our superior general, for initiating *Notebooks on the Spiritual Formation of the Congregation of the Sisters of the Holy Family of Nazareth* and entrusting the preparation of the first one to me, that is, *The Word of God in the Life and Writings of Blessed Mary of Jesus the Good Shepherd - Frances Siedliska*. Many thanks also to Sr. Halina Dołęga - general adviser - for her kind patronage during the preparation of this publication, as well as to Sr. Teresa Górska for proofreading the text. But above all, our gratitude to God for the life and writings of our Foundress, and for the possibility of exploring her spiritual message in greater depth in the light of the word of God. I trust that this modest study, supported by Blessed Mary's teaching, rooted in Holy Scripture, may also become an experience of the living and loving presence of Blessed Mary of Jesus the Good Shepherd for the reader. Amen!

LIST OF ABBREVIATION

I - BLESSED FRANCES SIEDLIKA'S WRITINGS

- A *Autobiography*, Rome 1997.
- K *Conferences of Our Mother Foundress*, Rome 1960.
- D1 *Spiritual Diary*, vol. I, Rome 2001.
- D2 *Spiritual Diary*, vol. II, Rome 2002.
- WD *On the Way with Her*, Rome 1992.
- M *Love Conquers All*, Rome 1989.
- P *Positio Super Virtutibus*, Romae 1977.
- DM *Dives in Misericordia*, Libreria Editrice Vaticana 1980.

II – CHURCH MAGISTERIUM

- DCE *Deus Caritas est*, Lettera enciclica di Benedetto XVI, 25 dicembre 2005.
- DV *Dei verbum*, Costituzione dogmatica sulla divina rivelazione del Concilio Vaticano II, 18 novembre 1965.
- LF *Gratissimam sane*, Lettera alle famiglie di Giovanni Paolo II, 2 febbraio 1994.
- LG *Lumen Gentium*, Costituzione dogmatica sulla Chiesa, 21 novembre 1964.
- NMi *Novo Millennio ineunte*, Lettera apostolica di Giovanni Paolo II, 6 gennaio 2001.
- RC *Redemptoris Custos*, Esortazione apostolica di Giovanni Paolo II, 15 agosto 1989.
- RH *Redemptoris Hominis*, Lettera enciclica di Giovanni Paolo II, 4 marzo 1979.
- RM *Redemptoris Mater*, Lettera enciclica di Giovanni Paolo II, 25 marzo 1987.
- VC *Vita Consecrata*, Esortazione apostolica post-sinodale di Giovanni Paolo II, 25 marzo 1996.

**BIBLE QUOTATION STATISTICS IN THE WRITINGS¹³⁸ OF BLESSED
FRANCES SIEDLIKA:**

OLD TESTAMENT		NEW TESTAMENT	
BOOK	NUMBER OF QUOTES	BOOK	NUMBER OF QUOTES
Psalms	31	St. Matthew	94
Song of Songs	11	St. John	68
Isaiah	5	St. Luke	51
Wisdom	4	Romans	12
Sirach	4	St. Mark	11
Jeremiah	2	1 Corinthians	10
Ecclesiastes	2	Galatians	10
Proverbs	2	1 John	9
1 Samuel	2	1 Peter	8
Daniel	1	Revelation	7
Genesis	1	Colossians	6
Job	1	2 Corinthians	6
1 Kings	1	Ephesians	6
		Hebrews	6
		Philippians	6
		Acts	5
		1 Thessalonians	4

¹³⁸ The quotation statistics in the table relate to the following: *Autobiography, Conferences, Diaries, vols I-II, The First Constitutions of the Congregation of the Sisters of the Holy Family of Nazareth and Selection of Letters.*

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BIOGRAPHICAL NOTE

Blessed Mary of Jesus the Good Shepherd, Frances Siedliska, was born on 12-11-1842 in Roszkowa Wola, Mazovia, of landowning parents, Adolf Siedliski and Cecilia Morawska, daughter of a director of the Ministry of Revenues and Treasury in Warsaw. Surrounded by the loving care of her parents, she received a broad education and a sound upbringing. Fr. Leander Lenzian, who prepared her for her First Holy Communion, aroused a desire for God in her, and was her spiritual director until 1879.

Frances discerned her religious vocation in childhood, but on account of her poor health, and her father's explicit opposition, she could not realize it. She spent the years from 1860 to 1865 at European health-resorts. In 1864 she made a private vow of chastity in Cannes, and told her father of her decision to offer up her life to God. After the death of her father (1870), she went to Rome (October, 1873), where she received the blessing of Pius the IXth to set up a new religious order. Because of the difficult political situation in Poland, the first community of the Congregation of the Sisters of the Holy Family of Nazareth was established in Rome in 1875. Its model was a life hidden in the Holy Family of Nazareth, whilst love of God and neighbour – as the *Kingdom of God's Love* – was a particular evangelical feature of the new Congregation. The new Congregation's central apostolic motive was a total devotion to the Church and to the Holy Father, the *building of the Kingdom of God's Love* on earth through diverse activities for the good of the family.

The young "Nazareth" was shaped under the spiritual care of many fervent priests, including: Fr. P. Semenenko, co-founder of the Resurrectionists, Fr. J. Cormier, Master-General of the Dominicans, and Cardinals W. van Rossum, L. Parocchi, M. Ledóchowski and A. Dunajewski, but first and foremost Fr. A. Lechert, who was our Foundress' spiritual director and long-standing protector of the Congregation on behalf of the Church.

Frances Siedliska arrived in Poland (1881) with a group of sisters and established the first foundation in Kraków. In 1891 she went to France to help Polish emigrants. In opening a house in London in 1895, she gave the beginnings to the Polish Catholic Mission in England. In 1994¹³⁹ John Paul II proclaimed her Patron of the Polish Catholic Mission in England and Wales. She arrived in Chicago in 1885, where she established the first house in America; Sisters of Nazareth shortly took up work in hospitals, schools and orphanages. The Congregation, though of Polish origin, was open to matters concerning the whole Church from the very beginning, and was of an international nature, to which the European culture of the Foundress contributed; an openness to the needs of all, irrespective of country or tradition. She desired to open houses in Russia (St. Petersburg), India and China.

A ripe fruit of her spirit was the heroic apostolate and death of 11 Sisters of Nazareth, the Martyrs of Nowogródek, who, during World War II (01/08/1943) lay down their lives for the sake of those who had been arrested. Pope John Paul II raised them to the altar (05-03-

¹³⁹ The date is correct in the English version.

2000). The completion of the testimony of the Nowogródek community of Christ the King was the life of the twelfth Sister of Nazareth, Servant of God Małgorzata Banaś, whose beatification process began on 22-01-2008, at the Roman level.

Blessed Frances Siedliska died in Rome (21-11-1902). At that time the Congregation numbered about 300 sisters at 26 centres in Europe and America. The Church confirmed the sanctity of Mary of Jesus the Good Shepherd when she was beatified by John Paul II (23-04-1989). Her liturgical commemoration is observed in the Catholic Church on the 29th of November. She is – as John Paul II underlined in his beatification homily, the **Apostle of the dignity of the family home and hearth**.

Frances Siedliska left many manuscripts. She wrote them at the request of Fr. Antoni Lechert. Her correspondence is extraordinarily rich, and numbers: 2729 letters, 85 postcards, 118 notes to Fr. Lechert; a great part of which testifies to ceaseless communications with the sisters – she also wrote to people who were not in the Congregation. In total, she left 7300 letters, 400 postcards and as many notelets. The Foundress' rich legacy of writings is characterised by its diversity of genre; apart from letters, there are notes on Fr. A. Lechert's teaching, chronicles, spiritual notes from retreats, the so-called *Talks with the Lord Jesus*, prayers, conferences, diaries, poems and an autobiography. The following have been published: *Selection of Letters* (1975), *Autobiography* (1997), *Spiritual Diary*, volumes 1 and 2 (2001, 2002).

Blessed Mary's life and writings are a testimony to and a reflection of God's work in her soul to all believers, a model of cooperation with grace in maturing to the fullness of life in Christ. Knowledge of her writings also serves to better understand her, and also God's paths, by which the Holy Spirit leads a soul. This motivated the publication of this *Notebook*.

Today the Sisters of Nazareth are realizing their mission on four continents, in seven provinces: Australia, Belarus, the Philippines, France, Ghana, Kazakhstan, Israel, Poland, Russia, the United States, Ukraine, Great Britain and Italy.

The Generalate House: Via Nazareth, 400, 00166 Roma, Italia.
Congregation's web page: www.nazarethfamily.org

Jak umiatac tak si oddatam Panu m
 wyzstho w moj Jedyng Ojcu mi, wosroj' wtki
 rywat jaku wole, Panu Jezusa, i, jicli jenu
 Pan Jezus umie jony yciu zachowai' rany
 to ufam i mi du tasku, abym spetnie
 mogta to wyzstho' erp du pragnie, ponum
 calce praci wicistwa miy upruty' natu
 ry i wyzstho' pokus watanickich

O Słowie Bożym w życiu i pismach
bl. Marii od Pana Jezusa Dobrego Pasterza
Franciszki Siedliskiej

Ojcie uby saeryst przyjchaj, bo serce by
 dluze mi mogto tyz prumici' bolu;
 a latciu twozgi mme ogarniaty - kochy
 mi us' lepiej wobito, ale jenu od wo
 su do eram serca chwyta - oddaj' ty
 m wyzstho' Panu Jezusowi aly erpici
 saeryst u mme co chce, Swoje
 spetnit. apodobani

s. Noela Wojtatowicz CSFN



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