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**SERVANTS OF THE MAGNIFICAT:
THE CANTICLE OF THE BLESSED VIRGIN
AND CONSECRATED LIFE
(Capitular Letter of the 210th General Chapter
of the Friars Servants of Mary)**

*Walter T. Brennan, O.S.M.**

This document is a "capitular letter" (183 pp.) from the 210th General Chapter of the Servites (Friars Servants of Mary), which took place in Mexico City in 1996. It is a continuation and development of *Do Whatever He Tells You*, the well-received document on Marian devotion from the Servite General Chapter of 1983. The relation of the Virgin Mary to the consecrated life within the Church is a major theme of the 1996 document. It also develops the relation between the Servite Marian charism and the Magnificat. Those interested in the Marian dimension of the consecrated life, as well as those involved with pastoral and religious formation, will find much of value in this document. Many of the references are to the preparatory documents of the Ninth Synod of Bishops, "The Consecrated Life and Its Mission in the Church and in the World," which occurred in 1994. (The synodal document, "The Consecrated Life," was itself issued in 1996, but it was not available to the capitulants.) The approach used in *Servants of the Magnificat* both complements and completes the other studies which have been presented at this fiftieth anniversary meeting of the

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Mariological Society of America, in keeping with its theme, "Magnificat: Remembrance and Praise."

The document has an Introduction and two major parts, each with two sections. The method I will employ here is the following: each numbered part will be covered and its salient points mentioned; at the finish, there will be an evaluation and summary.

The Introduction (1-3)

The first paragraph recalls four events which occasioned this letter. These are 1) the gathering of the general chapter itself in Mexico City, an occasion of unity; 2) the erection of the new Mexican Province; 3) the celebration of the jubilee year of St. Peregrine Laziosi, O.S.M. (1265 ca.-1345 ca.), patron of the infirm; 4) fraternal reflection to preserve and promote the spiritual heritage of the Order: to follow Christ, to witness to the Gospel through community life, service of others, a humble and penitent life, and devotion to the Mother and Servant of the Lord, the Order's abiding inspiration.

The opening paragraphs set the tone and direction of the document. It is a "capitular" letter, an official reflection on the state of the Order in the world, which emphasizes the spiritual tradition of humble service of the Lord, following the example of Mary, in our present circumstances. It is a deeper reflection on the Marian charism of the Order in the light of the Magnificat of Mary. This is offered to others in the Church (to be mentioned in the next paragraph).

The third paragraph enumerates the four groups to whom this document is addressed: 1) to Servite friars; 2) to the Servite Family (Five groups are mentioned under this heading: nuns, sisters, members of the Secular Institutes and the Secular Order, and other lay groups); 3) the bishops of dioceses in which Servite men and women live and work; and, 4) members of institutes of consecrated life with a distinct Marian charism. This letter will show that many of the reflections and proposals given in response to *Do Whatever He Tells You* have been considered and accepted.

I. The Blessed Virgin Mary and Consecrated Life at the Dawn of the Third Millennium (4–58)

The section begins with “The Metaphor of the Dawn,” which includes some of Pope John Paul II’s statements from *On the Coming of the Third Millennium*. Like the entire Church, the Servite Order must prepare for this jubilee. Some of the Pope’s suggestions for a fruitful preparation are listed: penance, efforts for a new evangelization and for increased ecumenical commitment, and the recognition of the role of Mary in the central place of Christ (#20, 33, 34, 43). The notion of dawn, used for the coming of the millennium, has great symbolic value.

This cosmic symbol brings together creation, the resurrection, the arrival of daytime and its opportunity for service and prayer. This is a hope-filled and optimistic symbol. It has been used in tradition of Mary as the one who came before Christ in the time of hope and salvation. It is used in this document to recall our awakening to hope and our response to the gift of the Spirit. It is what all religious institutes and societies need.

Part I/1. The Reasons for a Profound Harmony (6–27)

While Mary is recognized as a maternal presence and inspiration by all institutes, we can wonder how it is that Mary, married mother, can be in such profound harmony with the consecrated life of virginity and community. There are reasons for this harmony.

The first is that Mary was especially consecrated by the Holy Spirit. The Holy Spirit consecrated Jesus and all the Church enabling Jesus’ disciples to meet the demands of discipleship and mission in their life. But some are called to a special consecration through the evangelical counsels as a fuller expression of their baptismal consecration. Consecration is the work of the Spirit who sustains the will through grace. From the first moment of her existence, Mary was a person consecrated by the Holy Spirit, but she was consecrated by the Spirit especially in the Incarnation “in a most perfect way” (John Paul II, *Redemptiois donum*).

Mary’s will and life were dedicated to God. She was supported by grace. And just as consecrated persons lovingly

contemplate Christ, they will see Mary next to Him as a person consecrated to following the Father's will ("a new creature": *Lumen gentium*, 56). In this way, they see that their own consecration comes, like baptism, from the grace of the Holy Spirit, an anointing enabling them to be like Jesus and Mary (7-8).

Mary was the model of fidelity to vocation. Jesus gave himself to the mission of saving all people. The members of the Church have a universal vocation to holiness. The notion of vocation is paramount in the religious life. The calling demands a free and conscious response, definitive and total, in view of the Church's needs and guarantee. Throughout history, models of this response were found in Scripture. But the Mother of the Lord became their loftiest vocational model in her "yes" to the extraordinary call to be Mother of the Savior. There are multiple facets of her *fiat* which make her the model of response to this call. It was an expression of freedom and wisdom, made by the assistance of divine grace and the illumination and sustenance of the Spirit. It is a nuptial, filial, maternal, and a covenantal "yes"; it was total for her personally, involving her being and life, and it was pronounced in the name of all humanity. It was creative—the start of the new creation in Christ.

It is a *fiat* of obedience, expressing the spirituality of the poor of the Lord, and it is a response of peace, reconciliation, and mercy. Mary is proposed as "model of . . . total self-giving to God" (IX Synod of Bishops, *Instrumentum laboris*, 65). She has become the model of fidelity for all who seek to consecrate their lives to God totally, freely, definitively, and lovingly. For Servites, this Virgin of the Annunciation has been a perpetual model. Since its origin, the Order has had this image of the Virgin of the Annunciation always in mind. This is especially evident in the churches dedicated to her Annunciation and in their prayers today to the Virgin of the Annunciation (9-12).

As first and perfect disciple of the Lord, Mary is the primary example of following the person, the message, and the way of life of Jesus Who is the foundation of consecrated life. (Discipleship is a patristic theme, revived in the last thirty years.) Christ lived a virginal life in voluntary poverty, ever obedient to the Father's will; He called His disciples to build the Kingdom and create community, united in fraternity.

Paul VI (esp. *in Marialis cultus*, 147) and John Paul II (esp. in *Catechesi tradendae*, 1339; *Redemptoris Mater*, 20) referred to Mary as first and perfect disciple. A votive Mass of “Mary, Disciple of the Lord” was included in *The Collection of Masses of the Blessed Virgin Mary* (1987).

In the Gospel portraits, Mary is presented as example, reminder, and counsel of discipleship. Her commitment to the Father’s plan in her life of heroic faith and “yes” to the will of the Father show her exemplarity as disciple. Her faith, self-denial in the service of others, acceptance of the Word as one of God’s “poor,” and dedication to the work of Christ and the Kingdom; her sharing in the destiny of her Son and His Cross; and her active and prayerful vigilance, waiting for the promised Spirit—all these show her discipleship, as member and icon of the Church. Hence, the statement of *Lumen gentium* (46) that the following of Christ in a virginal and poor life was also “embraced by His Virgin Mother” and expresses the centuries-old belief of the Church. Mary of Nazareth is companion and sister to all who embrace consecrated life.

Therefore, Mary presents to us a call to coherence, an admonition to authenticity and a summons to self-examination in our own lives as disciples consecrated to the Lord. We are coherent if we ground ourselves in God’s word even in difficult times. We will be authentic if we sincerely seek to integrate everything in our life to serve the Kingdom. We must examine ourselves in the mirror of Mary to see if our celibacy is lived for God in our action and contemplation, and if our poverty is evangelical in our striving for justice in a manner of living which is modest and if our obedience is like her obedience to God as God’s humble servant. We must examine our fraternal fellowship to see if we live in one accord like the pre-Pentecostal community, in accord with the Servite acceptance of the Rule of St. Augustine as our primary inspiration (13-18).

Another reason which shows this profound harmony between consecrated life and the Mother of the Lord is that she is the first and highest expression of the relationship between consecration and mission. Consecrated persons must make their whole life a mission (IX Synod of Bishops, *Instrumentum*

laboris, 62), as images of Christ whose whole life was a salvific mission. Therefore Mary, called to be mother of the Son of God, was consecrated to be a worthy mother. As mother, every deed of Mary for Jesus has a universal and perennial symbolic character, valid for every disciple. Her deeds have salvific value. Other missions of Mary follow from her messianic motherhood, e.g., as *Socia Redemptoris*, *Mater viventium*, *supplex Mater*, *typus Ecclesiae*, and *exemplar virtutum*.

In the Blessed Virgin, mission flows directly from consecration. This can be seen in the Visitation, which has paradigmatic and prototypical value as a “first Pentecost,” immediately after her consecration and overshadowing by the Holy Spirit. At Pentecost the Holy Spirit guided and enabled the disciples to announce the Kingdom to all peoples. It is true of the Church. It is also true of the Servite Order whose mission, according to their Constitutions (73), is to witness to Christian love in serving others visibly, to extend fraternity to people today and to prolong the active presence of the Virgin in the history of salvation. It is also true of all who have embraced consecrated life. Their lives are an echo of her presence (Pope John Paul II). Servants of Mary hope to be among those making present the mother of Jesus actively, prolonging her *fiat*, her magnificat, compassion, and togetherness with all who suffer as Christ did and still does (19–23).

Part I/1. Conclusion (24–27)

We can, at the end of this first section, say that Mary was the beginning of religious life in the Church. It is true chronologically, historically, and causally. She was the first to live discipleship of her Son. She inspired many forms of consecrated life in the Church. She was active in the birth and formation of forms of consecrated life; she motivated many to become radical disciples of Jesus; by her intercession, she helps many to answer this call. And today the Church presents the Blessed Virgin to the faithful, through the institutes of consecrated life which make explicit reference to her evangelical witness, as an “incarnate memory and living exegesis” of the Mother of the Lord. We have seen four reasons why there is harmony between consecrated life and Mary: consecration, fidelity, discipleship, and

mission. These are four characteristics common to Mary and to the Church, visible in consecrated life (24-27).

Part I/2. The Typology of a Relationship (28-58)

In this section the document examines some of the ways the relationship of harmony actually took place. Themes found in various texts (Vatican II, documents of the magisterium, constitutions of Orders, other historical sources, scholarly and ascetical writings, etc.) are mentioned.

Mother (29-31). Catholic teaching and tradition tell of the importance of Mary's motherhood. Many institutes harken to this in their regard for Mary as our mother and mother of the institute (e.g., the Dominican Constitutions). Mary's spiritual maternity is especially emphasized. It developed in the context of monastic theology as a sort of "family treasure." Attention to her maternal activity toward Jesus was the pattern for seeing her activity towards members of institutes and was reflected in their liturgy and *lectio divina*. The approval of orders was often attributed to a maternal intervention of Mary. Members of the institutes of consecrated life are frequently exhorted to have a "filial attitude" to the Virgin Mary. "Lady" and "mother" are terms constantly paired in Servite spirituality. Servites have historically taken her into their own life (Jn 19:27; cf. *Redemptoris Mater*, 45).

Patron (32-34). Many institutes, especially those founded from the twelfth to the fourteenth centuries, regard Mary as their patron. On their patronal feast, they remember Mary and their origins, and they reaffirm with gratitude their charism and identity. Though the word "patron" has many medieval overtones, it shows trust in Mary's protection and concern. Groups with Mary as patroness trusted also in her seeking pardon for them and abundance of merits. She was, in terms of vassalage, their "lady." They repaid her with love and acts of homage (naming their churches for her) and their commitment to discipleship of Christ.

This typology fits Servite life, and the values it represents are present in contemporary life. Devotion to Mary is translated into service of others. Servite commitment involves understanding Mary's significance for the modern world and her

place in the mystery of salvation. Service of Mary includes working for unity. Mary is the “model of the confidence of God’s children”; she is served in the apostolate and in devotion.

Queen and Lady (35–39). Jesus is “King of kings and Lord of lords” (Rv 19:16), and Mary is “Queen and Lady” because of Him and like Him. Vatican II reaffirms this tradition, going back to the fourth century, and relates it to her conformity with Christ (*LG*, 55). Some especially question the use of “Queen” for Mary today. A discussion of the biblical background and the theological basis for her regality can be useful. Nevertheless, in today’s constitutions of consecrated institutes, these titles (“Queen,” “Our Lady”) are used regularly and with equivalent meanings for the most part.

Benedictine monasticism, and the orders of evangelical-apostolic life that arose from the twelfth century onwards, use both titles frequently. Regality is seen by them as the exercise of maternal service of compassion. The *Salve Regina misericordiae* is an antiphon, stemming from the eleventh century, which indicates how monks interpreted Mary’s queenship. Afterwards, “Queen” and “Mother” became closely related titles, as in the case of the Carmelites. Various aspects of her regality are emphasized: her glorious destiny and dignity, her loving dominion (the Montfortian tradition). Sometimes her regality is related to her virtues (e.g., Queen of humility) or to special categories of persons (e.g., Queen of Apostles—especially cherished by institutes with a strong apostolic charism).

Mary’s regality must be understood non-politically, without creating a distance between her and the Church of pilgrims (including consecrated persons). Her regality is like that of the People of God; it is the glorious consequence of her sharing in the humiliation of Jesus; the final outcome of her discipleship. It is the confirmation of her extraordinary Servanthood (Lk 1:38).

Servites have viewed these titles of Queen and Lady with a christological dimension. Mary brings her servants to imitate her Son. The only command of Mary to her servants is to obey her Son, Servant and King.

Teacher (40–43). Jesus is a teacher (Jn 3:2). He gave the Church the mission of teaching (Mt 28:20), so that it is the

“teacher of truth” (*Dignitatis humanae*, 44). It must use its experience to help all to live and defend the values inherent in every person.

Mary is a teacher by her charismatic teaching role as mother and disciple, and not by the office of teaching. She and St. Joseph transmitted to Jesus Jewish customs and the spirituality of the poor of the Lord. She probably taught the early Church about Jesus and his words. She continues now, encouraging his disciples to imitate their teacher.

She became a teacher by the perfection of her learning as a disciple, learning profoundly and progressively her Son’s teaching, by word and deed. Her faith was tested in adversity. This makes every consecrated person sensitive to her teaching. We see this especially in the virgins of the early Church and in the *lectio divina* of the monastic school.

Although the title “teacher” is not found explicitly in many constitutions, members of religious institutions are exhorted to learn from the Virgin Mary how to follow Christ radically. The Servite tradition refers to Mary as the teacher of holiness, humility, obedience, fortitude, contemplation, and service. Mary is recognized as teacher by her faith and wisdom and experience, more than for her knowledge.

Guide (44–46). God is called shepherd and guide of the people and of individuals. Jesus is the good shepherd and guide. Christian tradition applied this title to Mary as the new Miriam and as guide for consecrated virgins. She is the “guide of virgins” because of her experience. She is also called “star” and “model” who guides us by walking beside us. While valid for all Christian life, this title found special endorsement in the context of consecrated life. Constitutions present her as guide of contemplation and apostolic commitment. Servites see her as “support and guide in our life of prayer” (OSM Constitutions, 24). She is also our guide for service—the Servite charism—in her evangelical image of mother beside the cross (OSM Const., 319).

Model (47–49). Members of institutes of consecrated life imitate Christ, the one model for all Christians. Mary’s exemplary value as model of Christ’s life and sentiments is part of the

religious tradition, but it has undergone development. Documents of the magisterium on consecrated life, and many constitutions of the consecrated life, propose her as the model and example for such. As the working document for the IX Synod of Bishops tells us, "she is the model of vocation and of total self-giving to God . . . the first disciple and the incomparable example of following Christ . . . the model of apostolic and ecclesial service." Her life "is a model for all" but she reflects consecrated life "as in a mirror," as model of "spouse and virgin." She is not a static and distant model but the source of inspiration in the varied situations of consecrated life, as is shown in the varied structures and charisms of the consecrated life.

Servites turn to her as model and inspiration in terms of the issues of Servite life and charism, especially as model of prayerfulness, listening to the Word of God and to the promptings of the Holy Spirit, and of compassion (OSM Const. 6, 7, 24, 52). As we pray, attention to Mary leads us to renew our commitment to Christ.

Sister (50–52). Jesus is our brother and the highest of all creatures. Disciples must regard all humans as their brothers and sisters, and all creatures as belonging to Christ. Saint Francis beautifully expressed this sentiment in his canticle, when he said that he loved Mary for making Christ our brother.

While "sister" is an ancient title denoting "veneration," today it is used to remind us of the common condition shared with Mary by all disciples. Mary is our sister—as a creature, as a daughter of Adam, as a daughter of Zion, and as a daughter of the Church. Pope Paul VI used this title often, a title very dear to the Carmelites and in many writings on consecrated life, where it denotes closeness in the following of Christ. It is a title dear to monastic communities founded in this century by the Reform Churches, for whom Mary is their "poor sister" made rich by God's grace.

The Servite Order makes use of this title in devotions, documents, and liturgy. It is an image corresponding to our conception of consecrated life, and can be a new source of inspiration, providing further reason for living more fully our fellowship.

Part I/2. Conclusion (53–58)

In conclusion we see that Mary is a symbol rich in vital roles and exemplary values for members of institutes of consecrated life. This relationship is a gift from God that should be known and acknowledged. As a means, not an end, it is directed to Christ. Mary accompanies, supports, and guides consecrated persons, journeying with them as their mother, sister, and guide to the Holy Trinity. While Mary does this for the whole Church, consecrated persons live the life of the Church with special intensity.

No one type (title) exhausts this relationship which occurs in a variety of ways. Various relationships are often paired in constitutions. Personal and cultural inclinations guide different consecrated persons to specific ways of relationship. But the Marian dimension of these institutes can be seen not only externally (name, devotion, etc.), but also in their image of Mary as mother in a family. Mary is the “icon of consecrated life” by her pondering, by her communion with the Church, her life in the Spirit, and her service.

II. A Reflection on Consecrated Life in the Light of the Magnificat (59–114)

This part is a meditation intended to strengthen our incentive to live the consecrated life authentically and to enlighten our service.

Part II/1. The Gift of the Magnificat (60–67)

To grasp its appeal and profound meaning, we must understand the Magnificat as a gift from God. First, it is a gift joined to other gifts. The context of the Magnificat includes the canticles of the *anawim*: the Benedictus and the Nunc Dimittis. It belongs with other hymns of the New Testament. It paraphrases the Our Father and the beatitudes. It has its roots in the songs of Miriam, Deborah, Judith, and Anna, and it foreshadows the salvific events in which Mary took part.

It is a gift to receive, live, and pass on. While rooted in Jewish history, the Magnificat has its own literal meaning, as well as one developed and enriched in the ecclesial tradition. It

must be appropriated and prayed in each person's situation. Enriched by it, we also enrich it. By our own experience, we hand this gift on to others.

The Magnificat is a gift that leads into Mary's story. It includes all who sang it before us, and all who will sing it in the future. It unites us to Mary and all she represents (Israel, the Church, and all humans).

Finally, it is a gift for our prayer. Mary is, as the *Servite Constitutions* say, "creation's sublime model of prayerfulness" (OSM Const., 24). We, too, have to have the Spirit in our heart and be in union with Christ. She teaches us how prayer ought to be a response in praise to the Word that has been heard. She prays in faith, charity, and hope. She prays in fellowship with her own people, grateful to God for the fulfillment of his promises and for his having regarded his lowly servant.

The Magnificat is a model prayer, a grateful response for God's great deeds of the past, in the present, and for the future. God is sublime, yet close (Emmanuel). It is a text for our meditation (OSM Const., 154), our *lectio divina*. It is to be received as the Word of God, in faith and thanks, and to be treasured under the Spirit's guidance, and to be sung as an expression of gratitude to God for mercy. It is to be lived with trust in God, as it engages our whole person. It is a call to faith, holiness, and justice. It is a part of the identification of the Church and Mary, so we can pray like her and with her (*Servite Vigilia*, 45).

Part II/2. The Charism of Service in the Light of the Magnificat (68–114)

This section is not an exegetical study. It offers suggestions to make our service more pleasing to God, a channel of grace for others (68).

A Difficult Service (69–72). It is difficult to speak of God to men and women of today. The Magnificat is a discourse on God. It is in traditional Jewish language but concerns a new reality, the Incarnation, seen by new eyes, those of Mary. It is a new revelation of the God of the covenant.

Speech about God is difficult to postmodern persons. We must use understandable language, without condemnation. Some people, belonging to new religious movements or cults,

are seeking to find some new direction for life. The God of Jesus and Mary provides a sure but difficult way—one without immediate communication with the transcendent, without promises of worldly success. We must show how Mary adhered to God's plan, faithful and free, without psychological coercion or manipulation.

Mary's example demonstrates that faith is the starting point, that we speak at the Spirit's urging, and that we should be aware of our own lowliness. Only grace and revelation can traverse the infinite distance between God and us. Our speech must be concrete, about real conditions in the world. Like Mary, we must be directed to others. All genuine theology becomes necessarily anthropological in its concern for the welfare of human beings.

A Service of Praise (73–76). The biblical command to “praise the Lord” is meant for all people. The Magnificat marks the summit of this praise in the Hebrew Scriptures and in the Church. This canticle is a history of salvation in song, a disclosure of God's great deeds for us in Jesus. Mary shows that our praise must come from the whole person—body and spirit. The joy of the canticle begins with and redounds to Abraham. The gift of joy from God is promised to us, so the liturgy and prayers often refer to Isaiah 61:10.

As speech of praise, the Magnificat is speech about God. The Spirit moves us as Mary and Jesus were so moved (Lk 10:21). In his Commentary on the Magnificat, Martin Luther shows how this canticle gives expression to Mary's spiritual experience. This praise comes from our life commitment to do the Will of God. We become a greater image of God as we magnify God (Origen). Together with the whole Church, members of the consecrated life, learn about God from the Magnificat.

At the Service of the New Evangelization (77–83). New issues have arisen which call for a new evangelization. Among these issues are the service of life in all its forms, the protection of the environment, the move to greater unity among people while respecting cultural diversity, the achievement of lasting peace based on truth and justice, the development of interreligious dialogue, and the defense of women's dignity.

The new evangelization is not a new public revelation. It is the immutable Word of God brought to bear on the signs of the

times, disclosing new meanings revealed by the Spirit. Mary's Magnificat offers us two suggestions: she shared her faith in the Incarnation without delay, and she shared her gift of the new with others in continuity with the past.

Servites and other religious have reached out to the needy in Asia, Africa, Latin America, the Caribbean, and Eastern Europe. We give freely, because we received freely the gifts of Christ and Mary. Servites seek to present Mary "to God's people in their lives, words, and publications" (OSM Const., 87). We support our Marian centers which spread Marian doctrine and sound Marian piety. We strengthen the Pontifical Theological Faculty, the Marianum, entrusted to us by ecclesiastical mandate. Like Mary, we present the new in continuity with the past. The plan of God includes a dialectic between past and present, as exemplified in the person and teaching of Jesus.

Pope John Paul II said that the new evangelization is new in its fervor, its methods, and its expression. Mary's fervor comes from her faith and humility. Her method entails generosity to God, eagerness and commitment in her service. Three houses inspire us: the house of Nazareth where Mary is in union with Christ; the house of Zechariah to which Mary brings the good news and grace; the house of Pentecost where the apostles with Mary receive the Spirit and set out to proclaim the Word to all. New expressions follow.

At the Service of the Cause of Women (84-95). Servites must keep the role of women in mind in their life and work. Their mission integrates faith and justice. These reflections start from the Magnificat where we see how God "promoted" a woman by profoundly involving her in the work of salvation.

The Visitation (85). Two women are the protagonists at the beginning of the fullness of time. One is pregnant by the grace of God and one is pregnant by the Holy Spirit. Elizabeth gives the first blessing in the New Testament. Mary gives the first prophetic utterance of the New Testament. From them is asked the first act of service for salvation in the New Testament.

Jesus and women (86-88). Jesus breaks the old forms of bondage when he affirms the equality of women with men in discipleship and the proclamation of the new kingdom.

Women connect the two themes of the promotion of women and the new evangelization. Anna (Lk 2:37) images

how apostolic commitment flows from prayer and is directed to the proclamation of the Savior. The Samaritan woman (Jn 4) is the first woman apostle, sowing seeds to be later harvested by apostles (Acts 8:1-17). Mary of Bethany images how disciples should be hearers of the Word. Martha of Bethany professes faith in Christ and calls her sister to the Church to listen to the Word, as Peter professed his faith and was led by his brother Andrew to Christ. Mary of Magdala is the first of the accompanying women in Jesus' evangelization. Christ entrusted the "divine truths" to women as well as to men. Today women must be given again "their own word in many Church endeavors."

Many Church documents of the last forty years have considered the women's issue. At its conclusion, Vatican Council II sent a message to women affirming their "basic equality with men." Documents of recent popes and conferences of bishops have shown the urgency of the issue and have endorsed women's legitimate demands and rights. In comparison with male religious, women religious have occupied a subordinate place. Some suggestions based on experience and the Magnificat in the promotion of women are offered here.

Suggestions (89-95). What is required is the willingness to change age-old attitudes and to let go of disdainful expressions and harsh judgments. Gentleness, arising from deep respect, must replace paternalism. We must see persons not based on their sex, but see the reciprocity and complementarity of the different sexes based on equal dignity. We must be free of fear in order to accept different views, even though we cannot foresee consequences. Our task is to discern God's plan and presence in the life of the Church.

At the Annunciation Mary shows herself capable of autonomous action and able to assume responsibilities. At the Magnificat she sings of God as savior of the oppressed. She urges us to take sides with the oppressed, as she and God do. Throughout the ages, women have suffered many forms of oppression and marginalization. We have to rid ourselves of the notion that the "weakness" of women is natural, since it is in fact the result of ingrained cultural views and historical conditionings. At Zechariah's house, at Cana, at Calvary, and in the

upper room, Mary shows her greatness in cooperation with God. This is God's plan. She is blessed among all women, and her blessedness reaches forward to all women and men who do the will of the Father and are open to Christ's word.

Mary's "yes," as model of faith and love for all men and women, also shows her exemplarity in the promotion of women. She is not distant or inimitable in her exaltation; she is, rather, a limited and privileged creature who needed faith, who had the ability to decide and to take risks in her freedom. We must reject the notion that Christ is the model for men and Mary for women. Mary is not the defender of any socio-cultural type of female existence. She is the universal example of discipleship.

Still she is the highest expression of womanhood and motherhood. We see this in the patristic, liturgical, and ecclesial tradition, and not from mythical feminine traits. We must go beyond mere words of affirmation of these principles. As Servites we must rid ourselves of prejudices and fight against male chauvinism. We must endorse activities of those striving for juridical recognition of women in apostolic, cultural, and administrative areas of church life. We must work together with women in all our associations.

At the Service of Human Liberation (96–100). The Magnificat is a song of messianic liberation. The power of God in the Exodus came into action again with Mary. She is the first to be liberated from her lowliness, like the people of Israel and the women who were made fruitful (Sarah, Leah, and Anna). God's preferential option for the poor runs throughout salvation history. Mary is the object of this option. She, the least, has become first (Lk 1:48). She is the servant of the Liberator God in her cooperation with God as instrument of God's liberation. She is exalted by God because she is humble ("emptying"). The proud are denounced for their dominating and disdainful spirit. Liberation is not only from external oppression but from pride. How can we liberate the oppressed, unless we are liberated in our hearts? Servites, as "servants," must ask for this grace from the Spirit. The Virgin of the Magnificat knows that this liberation is wholistic, requiring a loving relationship with God and peacefulness with all people. Otherwise, the bonds of oppression cannot be replaced by fellowship and solidarity. Mary and

Jesus knew that, though oppressed by the powerful, God lifts up the lowly, giving them dignity and hope. Mary announces divine liberation from social oppression.

Among the causes of social injustice today are neo-liberal capitalism, which proposes the totalitarianism of the market place as an absolute value. It is without concern for the common good and based on a conception of freedom without any ethical-religious reference, favoring every form of individualism (subjectivism, relativism, hedonism).

The Virgin of the Magnificat suggests a few basic attitudes to servants of Mary to serve the excluded on behalf of their liberation. Remaining humble but avoiding social quietism, we must know that we are not saviors of the world and that every loving action is liberating. With eyes open on the world, we will be realistic like Mary, contrasting the powerful and the lowly, the hungry and the rich. We read the signs of the time—for example, structures which cause oppression—in the light of the Gospel.

We view all reality with the eyes of Mary. In the Magnificat, we learn that God acts in and through Mary. We see the poor with her affection and generosity, the marginalized with her compassion, the excluded with her closeness. We bring hope to others as she did. The Magnificat is a song of hope, for nothing is impossible with God who will prevail over injustice. Mary bore the author of life. She is the mother of life.

At the Service of Life and God's Works (101–110). The Magnificat is a hymn to life. In *Evangelium vitae*, Pope John Paul II calls us to promote the cause of life worldwide. Mary is “mother of the living” and universal mother. There are threats to life: hunger, criminal injustice, ecological devastation. Hunger is not only an economic problem; ethical principles must be brought into the discussion. Christ came to bring life, including food. Ecological devastation is a concern of all people, including the Church. Creation is God's work. Mary is mother of the Creator, cosmic wisdom, the vertex of creation. At the time of our Founders and of St. Francis, there was a tradition of love for nature. Today Mary is our model in this exercise of responsibility. Mary is the “center” through whom God comes to all creation (G. Vanucci, O.S.M., “I Servi e la Vergine Madre,” *Servitium* 17 [1983]:94).

Support of human development initiatives must be supported, especially those aimed at creating employment. We must aim at making others aware of the imbalances in society to get them involved in structural change for the common good.

At the Service of Ecumenism (111–114). Mary is the perfect icon of all who are conformed to Christ. She is the outstanding example of all who have the gift of unity from the Spirit. She is one with Christ. She gathers all creatures together in her praise of God. Service of Mary is inherently ecumenical. As servants we are dedicated to promoting that unity. We manifest an ecumenical hospitality to all so that they can find Jesus and Mary.

Reflections

Because this document is not readily available, it seemed preferable to present first a summary of its contents. Many will not have time to read the entire document because of their busy schedules. The document is rich and complex. The outline is useful for locating specific topics. The document was intended to promote reflection and be translated into new attitudes and approaches. While this capitular letter to the Servites is not intended primarily for an academic audience, many of the reflections are the result of the current exegetical and theological scholarship. The letter provides the references, which may be consulted for further study. The letter also contains many figures useful for preaching and teaching, for example, the significance of the “three houses”—Nazareth, Cana, and the Cenacle.

The document combines Scripture and Tradition. The document’s assertions begin with a strong scriptural content and proceed to show how the Scripture has been interpreted in the medieval, Servite, and ecclesial traditions. The section on ecology, women’s issues, and the international economy are scripturally rich but also manifest a familiarity with anthropological and sociological developments. The document also refers to the constitutions of different institutes of the consecrated life, and offers reflections of scholars recognized for their work in exegesis and theology.

This document will be compared to *Do Whatever He Tells You*, which came from the 1983 Servite General Chapter. The two are different and have different purposes. The times are different for each. Rather than being compared, they should be used together. The documents are useful not only for study and prayer, but also for the classroom. I have personally found the sections on Mary as creature in the new creation, on the option for the poor, and on the issue of women's struggle for equality, useful for my own classroom. Neither document claims to be the final word on the topic. The more reflection, the better our appreciation of this document will be, as we individually and ecclesially strive to arrive at a deeper appreciation of the meaning of Mary's *fiat* for our lives and times.