

Autumn 2023

THE GOLDEN THREAD



THE IMMACULATE TODAY



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MARIA

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PEACE & ALL GOOD!



I hope that you are keeping well, and that the summer months radiated with the grace of God working in your lives, despite the inevitable challenges and trials we all face at times. When reflecting upon a theme for this Autumn's Golden Thread, I felt drawn to write about the theme of fruit and fruitfulness, especially regarding how we, as followers of Christ, ought to understand God's repeated call for us to "Be fruitful!".

I think that careful attentiveness to the theme of *being fruitful* – a reality which must always be aided and nourished by God's love and grace – is something of especial importance in the world in which we live today. It is hard to enumerate the variety of pressures and coercive forces which seek to impinge upon all of us, so as to render our lives – and relationships – less fruitful and even sterile! To take a ready example, how often are children seen as a nuisance, a costly burden, an inconvenience/hindrance to either one's career or one's social status? Parents of large families can find themselves, not only the butt of cruel jokes, but also of cutting, hurtful and derogatory comments. Even within the hearts and minds of Christ's faithful, it can happen that a couple's sacrificial commitment to being open to the gift of new life (through bodily fruitfulness within their marriage) is judged, by others, to be inconsiderate, reckless or as being akin to a type of spiritual profligacy.

A person's willingness/openness to be fruitful can also be belittled or denigrated whenever their offer to use their talents (be they musical, artistic, literary, practical, organisational etc.) is flatly rejected without either due consideration or the expression of a sincere gratitude for the offer. An attentiveness to ensuring that our own lives are fruitful in the ways that God intends them to be, must be accompanied by a commitment not to unduly or hastily inhibit a holy fruition happening in the lives of others. How often, both as individual members of Christ's body and of wider society, have we allowed our hearts to harden, our horizons to shorten and our willingness to rejoice in the fruitfulness of others to wither!

EDITORIAL / *Continued*

God's call for us to bear fitting fruit, to live lives of abundant fruitfulness according to His Will, must never be confused with a straightforward productivity. Certainly, fruitfulness can lead to greater yields of certain things, but we must always remember that our vocation to *be fruitful* is a call to *a way of being/living*, rather than a means to an end. It is for this reason why a bed-ridden child or elderly person can live a life immeasurably more fruitful (through prayer, consecrated suffering and intimacy with Jesus) than that of a robust workaholic (who might labour only for his or her own benefit). The sacred call to fruitfulness, as described in Sacred Scripture (and as witnessed in the lives of the saints), is something with far greater reach than simple biological fecundity. Every Christian, no matter what talents or limitations they might have, has been called, by God, to *be fruitful!* Those married, the ordained and those consecrated to God as religious are all called to live fruitful, holy, chaste and joy-filled lives.

- “The institution of marriage, according to the words of Genesis 2:24, expresses not only the beginning of the fundamental human community, which by the ‘procreative’ power proper to it (*‘be fruitful and multiply,’* Gen 1:28) serves to continue the work of creation, but at the same time it expresses the Creator’s salvific initiative, which corresponds to man’s eternal election” (John Paul II, *Marriage as the Primordial Sacrament*, General Audience of October 6, 1982, §7).
- “Leaving father and mother, the priest follows Jesus the Good Shepherd in an apostolic communion, in the service of the People of God. Celibacy, then, is to be welcomed and continually renewed with a free and loving decision as a priceless gift from God, as an incentive to pastoral charity as a singular sharing in God’s fatherhood and in the *fruitfulness* of the Church, and as a witness to the world of the eschatological kingdom” (John Paul II, *Pastores Dabo Vobis*, Post-Synodal Apostolic Exhortation on the Formation of Priests in the circumstances of the present day, 1992, §29.5).
- Consecrated religious are called to be “authentically spiritual men and women, capable of endowing history with *hidden fruitfulness* by unceasing praise and intercession, by spiritual counsels and works of charity” (John Paul II, *Vita Consecrata*, Post-Synodal Apostolic Exhortation on the Consecrated Life and its mission in the Church and in the world, 1996, §6.2).

EDITORIAL / *Continued*

In late July, I was driving on a very wet motorway, and I was listening to a repeat episode of *Gardener's Question Time* which had first aired earlier that week (when the weather had still been dry). The first question posed was by a lady who described how, this year, her Photinias (ornamental shrubs) had been covered in small white flowers, whereas in previous years, they hadn't had any. The lady wanted to know why this year had been different to past years. In answering, one of the experts on the panel described how this year, a lot of plants have been stressed (stressed, that is, from last year's dry weather). It turns out that, for many plants, one of the consequences of very dry conditions/precious low resources, is that they don't wilt and die, but rather, on the contrary, put all their energy together so as to have one last, magnificent bloom: ensuring that they do their best to produce the next generation, even if the plant itself doesn't make it.

This got me thinking, especially in relation to our holy mother, the Church. For a variety of diverse reasons, many Catholics I speak to, tell me that they feel like they have been going through some sort of spiritual drought; a time of sustained testing. They, perhaps, no longer feel nourished liturgically, or maybe the soil around their spiritual feet has grown hard through having witnessed various scandals within the Church – or destructive behaviours not having been corrected – and so forth. Some people no longer feel welcome in the Church, others feel they have been badgered to the sidelines or neglected. I am sure that all of us can sympathise with at least some of these struggles and hurts. The question before each of us, however, is should we, when faced with such a difficult social and ecclesiological climate, wilt and die? Is that what our faithful Lord is expecting of us? Or should we, like those Photinias which were bursting with life, respond to adverse conditions with a sincere and exuberant display of fruitfulness, even if we fear we might have to suffer and sacrifice to do so? As I drove down the motorway, with the windscreen wipers beating furiously, I was aware that the much-needed rain, spoken of and so dearly hoped for on the episode, was finally falling! So, likewise, God is never miserly with the gift of His grace, and He will – if we allow Him to – deluge our lives with His goodness. Let us then, commit to being fruitful and hope-filled, in season and out of season.

It is my dear hope that, wherever you might be reading this article, whatever path the Lord has deemed it right to place you upon, the articles and contributions made in this edition of *The Golden Thread*, might serve both as an inspiration and encouragement for you to continue living a holy and fruitful Christian life. By so doing, you will be sharing, fully, in the Lord's mission, and in imitation of Mary Immaculate – Christ's First and Perfect Disciple – who willingly and unhesitatingly placed her entire life at the service of God's plan by rendering unto Him, the total gift of self, "Behold, I am the handmaid of the Lord; let it be to me according to your word" (Lk 1:38). O Mary, Mother of Divine Fruitfulness, pray for us!

Fr Gerard Mary Toman, OFM Conv.

The Fruitfulness of Mary

Blessed is The Fruit of Your Womb

“Blessed are you among women, and blessed is the *fruit* [Greek: καρπός: *karpos*] of your womb” (Lk 1:42). These are the words that Elizabeth proclaimed, moments after an extraordinary chain of events. To begin, shortly after the Annunciation, Mary had left her home in Nazareth to visit her kinswoman Elizabeth, and had just arrived at Zechariah’s house, greeting Elizabeth, his wife. Mary was, by now, already carrying Jesus Christ – God Incarnate – within her womb; the Blessed Virgin was the true Ark of the New Covenant, the vessel of unimaginable flawlessness, carrying the Living God within her, to the hill country. When Elizabeth heard Mary’s voice, the child within her own womb (John the Baptist) leaped up, and Elizabeth was *filled with the Holy Spirit* (ἐπλήσθη πνεύματος ἁγίου: *eplēsthē Pneumatōs Hagiou*).

The scene is framed with perfect balance: two mothers, two unborn children. Elizabeth had been barren yet has now conceived naturally; Mary is a virgin, yet has conceived “of the Holy Spirit” (ἐκ πνεύματος ἑστίν ἁγίου: *ek Pneumatōs estin Hagiou*) (Mt 1:20). Elizabeth has been made fruitful through her husband Zechariah (a grace-imbued moment anticipated by years of consecrated suffering and steadfast faithfulness); Mary has been made fruitful through God Himself (a union made possible by Mary’s singular immaculate receptiveness to the Will of God, and her spotless faith in His promise). Here, their two little boys meet, hidden as they are, in the waters of their mothers’ wombs; the next time they will meet, in Scripture, is when both are immersed in the saving waters of the Jordan. In this glorious, intimate, redeeming scene, the sacredness of marriage, the glory of motherhood, the dignity of virginity, the unique vocation of women, and the irreplaceable preciousness of the unborn, all come together powerfully, with each voice proclaiming the Gospel of Life and the joy of salvation.

In this scene, notice that God-the-Holy Spirit, through the mouth of Elizabeth, refers to Jesus as *the fruit* of Mary. In other words, in Sacred Scripture, God explicitly ties Christ-the-fruit (Who is Life), with His Blessed Mother, (the fruitful Tree of Life). This weaving together of Jesus and Mary, God and the Mother of God, the fruit and the graceful tree, underlines and affirms a foundational truth of our Christian faith, namely, that Jesus took His human nature, His flesh and blood, from Mary.

The inheritance of the Lord are the sons (cf. Ps 127:3), the reward of the fruit that has come forth from Mary’s womb. He is the fruit of the womb . . . Mary is the branch; the flower of Mary is Christ, who, like the fruit of a good tree, according to our progress in virtue, now flowers, bears fruit in us, and is reborn through the Resurrection that returns life to his body.



Our holy faith teaches us that Jesus (true God) wasn't *inserted* into Mary's womb, but was *conceived in* Mary's womb (Cf. Lk 1:31; ἐν γαστρὶ: *en gastri*, literally "in womb") drawing from His Mother what was required for His incarnation as true man. In this way, biologically speaking, Jesus really is *the fruit* of Mary, and He is *the fruit* of Mary's ancestors all the way back to Adam. This, in no manner, negates or disregards the ancestors Jesus could rightfully claim from St Joseph's lineage (as Joseph was Jesus' legitimate legal father). Still, however, in the scene of the Visitation, the Holy Spirit, through the lips of Elizabeth, is proclaiming a wonderful truth to Mary: "blessed is the fruit of *your* womb".

In the very next verse (Lk 1:43) Elizabeth announces Mary as "the mother of my Lord" (ἡ μήτηρ τοῦ κυρίου μου: *hē mētēr tou Kūriou mou*). This scriptural truth – Mary's Divine Motherhood – has been treasured by the Church from her earliest days, and was solemnly declared at the Council of Ephesus (Third Ecumenical: AD 431). At this great Church Council, it was confirmed that, given Christ is true God, the Holy Virgin can be titled the *Mother of God* (*theotokos*: "God-Bearer") since she begot, according to the flesh, the Word of God made flesh (see: *Anathemas of Cyril*, in Denzinger-Hünemann (DH), 252). Later, in AD 451, the Chalcedonian Creed definition affirmed the Marian title "Mother of God" stating that, "Our Lord Jesus Christ . . . for us and for our salvation was born as to His humanity from Mary, the Virgin Mother of God" (DH, 301). Furthermore, the canons of the Second Council of Constantinople (Fifth Ecumenical: May–June AD 553) affirmed that the eternal Word of God "descending from Heaven, was made flesh from Mary, the holy and glorious Mother of God, ever virgin, and was born of her . . ." (DH, 422).

Jesus teaches that "a sound tree cannot bear evil fruit . . ." (Mt 7:18; Cf. Lk 6:43 "For no good tree bears bad fruit"). Given that Jesus was "the fruit" of Mary's womb (by the power of the Holy Spirit), we can begin to glimpse just what a holy and beautiful tree Mary must be, in order to bear such a fruit as Christ Himself. Again, Jesus teaches us that "You will know them by their fruits" (Mt 7:16). By Our Lord's own teaching, therefore, we can *know* Mary by her fruit, Jesus Christ. So, by using simple verses from Scripture, without bending them out of shape, or leaning upon them to make them conform to our own perspectives, we can gently but firmly refute any allegation that Mary was a sinner (for how could a sinless fruit be borne of a sinful/corrupt tree?) or that Mary has no part to play in our salvation (for from whom did Christ our Saviour take His Precious Blood, a blood that He would later shed for our salvation?).

In the days of Moses, the original Ark of the Covenant was lined with “pure gold” (Ex 25:11; 37:2) and was made of acacia wood (revered for its imperishable qualities, Cf. Ex 25:10; 37:1). Yet this Ark only contained a golden urn holding the manna, and Aaron’s rod that budded, and the tables of the covenant (Cf. Heb 9:4). If, therefore, the former Ark of the Covenant only carried stone and wood, and yet still had to be constructed using only the most precious and purified of materials, how much more brilliant and incorruptible would the Living Ark (Mary) have to be, given that she was carrying the Living God Himself (Christ Jesus)?

O noble Virgin, truly you are greater than any other greatness. For who is your equal in greatness, O dwelling place of God the Word? To whom among all creatures shall I compare you, O Virgin? You are greater than them all. O [Ark of the New] Covenant, clothed with purity instead of gold! You are the Ark in which is found the golden vessel containing the true manna, that is, the flesh in which divinity resides. Should I compare you to the fertile earth and its fruits? You surpass them!

The Discourse of Saint Athanasius, the Turin papyrus (*St Athanasius died in AD 373*)

We must ask, therefore, what sort of *fruit* was Mary herself. To answer this most fully, we can look to those Magisterial documents whose specific intention it is to expound upon the glories of Mary. In the Papal Bull, *Ineffabilis Deus* (1854), which dogmatically defined the Immaculate Conception, we find the following passage:

The most Blessed Virgin Mary was safe and sound from the infection of any sin, and free from its contagion in every way – in body, and soul, and intellect, and that she was always basking in the light of God’s presence, and united with Him in everlasting companionship; that she never was a moment abiding in darkness, but always radiant in light; and that, therefore, she had manifestly been a fit abode for Christ, not on account of the loveliness of her bodily form, but of the grace and beauty which from the beginning adorned her soul.

Ineffabilis Deus §12



Here we discover that the most important element of Mary's fruitfulness – the feature of Mary which made her most perfectly compatible with bearing Christ (the fruit of her womb) – was the fecundity of her immaculate soul which has been, from her conception onwards, filled with grace and divine indwelling. This observance would be a point of reflection for Pope St Paul VI in his Apostolic Exhortation *Signum Magnum* (a great sign) on consecration to the Blessed Virgin Mary (released 13 May 1967 on the 50th anniversary of Our Lady of Fatima). Here, the Pontiff wrote:

Mary's eminent sanctity was not only a singular gift of divine liberality. It was also the fruit of the continuous and generous cooperation of her free will in the inner motions of the Holy Spirit. It is because of the perfect harmony between divine grace and the activity of her human nature that the Virgin rendered supreme glory to the Most Holy Trinity and became the illustrious ornament of the Church, which thus greets her in sacred Liturgy: "You are the glory of Jerusalem, the joy of Israel, the honour of our people (Second Antiphon of lauds, feast of the Immaculate Conception)."

Signum Magnum, §13

In a later Apostolic Exhortation, *Marialis Cultus* (Marian Devotion, 1974) Pope St Paul VI pays great attention to exploring the extraordinary implications of Mary's "unblemished and fruitful virginity" (§11). Drawing from the profound Mariological insights of the Church Fathers, Paul VI describes how it was the Holy Spirit who

consecrated and made fruitful Mary's virginity and transformed her into the "Abode of the King" or "Bridal Chamber of the Word," the "Temple" or "Tabernacle of the Lord," the "Ark of the Covenant" or "the Ark of Holiness," titles rich in biblical echoes.

Marialis Cultus, §26

In our lives as Catholic Christians, therefore, whenever we consider fruitfulness in a natural sense (be it the gift of children in marriage, or the fruits of one's labour and good works), we must never forget that, by looking to Mary and her example, we discover that in the first place, we must ask for God's grace in cultivating a fruitful soul and interior life. After all, it is only God's indwelling within us – our living in friendship with God – that makes our efforts and fruits bear eternal significance.

Paul VI also describes how the Blessed Virgin's "miraculous motherhood, [was] set up by God as the type and exemplar of the fruitfulness of the Virgin-Church" (*Marialis Cultus*, §19); this helps to enkindle within each of us the awareness that, just as Mary was the Perfect Disciple of Christ, so too we, as living members of Christ's body the Church, "must all live together the life of Christ, so that in one and the same body 'we may bear fruit for God' (Rom 7:4)" (*Marialis Cultus*, §33). It should be noted that *Lumen Gentium*, the Second Vatican Council's Dogmatic Constitution on the Church (1964), had previously sought to root the concept of fruitfulness within the seedbed of ecclesiological reflection by placing focus upon "the mystery of that unity and fruitful love which exists between Christ and His Church (*Lumen Gentium*, §11.2).



Finally, in his masterful encyclical on the Blessed Virgin, *Redemptoris Mater* (1987), Pope St John Paul II traces how Mary's fruitfulness in bearing Christ, developed – *through* and *in* Christ – into a maternal fruitfulness whose warmth envelops His entire Church:

"Behold your mother." Thus, there began to develop a special bond between this Mother [Mary] and the Church. For the infant Church was the fruit of the Cross and Resurrection of her Son. Mary, who from the beginning had given herself without reserve to the person and work of her Son, could not but pour out upon the Church, from the very beginning, her maternal self-giving.

Redemptoris Mater, §40

Pope St John Paul II seeks to extend the concept of fruitfulness beyond, simply, a concrete, quantifiable quality. Certainly, Mary's fruitfulness includes the fact that she was the Mother of Jesus *in the flesh*, but Mary can also be honoured for the fruitfulness which blossoms forth as a jewel of her virginity. As perpetual virgin – a woman entirely consecrated to God – Mary possesses among all creatures, an unparalleled spiritual fruitfulness. Once again, Mary – as *fruitful virgin* and *fruitful mother* – is mirrored by the Church, for:

following the example of Mary, the Church remains the virgin faithful to her spouse: The Church herself is a virgin who keeps whole and pure the fidelity she has pledged to her Spouse. For the Church is the spouse of Christ, as is clear from the Pauline Letters (cf. Eph 5:21–33; 2 Cor 11:2), and from the title found in John: “bride of the Lamb” (Rev 21:9). If the Church as spouse keeps the fidelity she has pledged to Christ, this fidelity, even though in the Apostle’s teaching it has become an image of marriage (cf. Eph 5:23–33), also has value as a model of total self-giving to God in celibacy “for the kingdom of heaven”, in virginity consecrated to God (cf. Mt 19:11–12; 2 Cor 11:2). Precisely such virginity, after the example of the Virgin of Nazareth, is the source of a special spiritual fruitfulness: it is the source of motherhood in the Holy Spirit.

Redemptoris Mater, §43.3

It should not be forgotten that, in the Garden of Eden, “the woman said to the serpent . . . God said, ‘You shall not eat of the fruit of the tree which is in the midst of the garden, neither shall you touch it, lest you die’” (Gen 3: 2–3). We can often overlook the fact that Adam and Eve weren't even permitted *to touch* the fruit of the Tree of the Knowledge of Good and Evil, let alone eat of it. However, after having let herself be beguiled, tempted and misled by the devil, Eve began to lust after the tree's fruit; seeing that it was good for food, delightful to the eyes, and desirous because it could make her wise, “she took of its fruit and ate; and she also gave some to her husband, and he ate” (Gen 3:6). In short, Eve disobeyed God's command – along with Adam her husband – and sin and death entered into the world (cf. Rom 5:12–21). Whereas Eve's disobedience spiritually enslaved the human race, Mary's obedience to God broke these fetters. Eve's disobedience was, ultimately, rooted in her unbelief and in her unwillingness to trust God's goodness, whereas Mary's obedience is the holy fruit of her faith.



To conclude this reflection on the fruitfulness of Mary, we look at an Angelus address given by Pope Francis, to mark the Solemnity of Mary's Immaculate Conception (8 December 2014). Here, the Pontiff seeks to emphasise the point that, for our lives to be fruitful in the Lord, we must first listen to God, and then accept His Holy Will for our lives. The Blessed Virgin, who is presented as being the perfect model for us, was limitlessly fruitful precisely because she was limitlessly attentive to God, attuned to His Divine Presence, attentive to His words, receptive in her deep listening, and humble in her total submission and consecration to the Divine Will.

The message of today's Solemnity of the Immaculate Conception of the Virgin Mary can be summed up in these words: everything is a free gift from God, everything is grace, everything is a gift out of his love for us. The Angel Gabriel calls Mary "full of grace" (Lk 1:28): in her there is no room for sin, because God chose her from eternity to be the mother of Jesus and preserved her from original sin. And Mary corresponds to the grace and abandons herself, saying to the Angel: "Let it be done to me according to your word" (v. 38). She does not say: "I shall do it according to your word": no! But: "Let it be done to me . . .". And the Word was made flesh in her womb. We too are asked to listen to God who speaks to us, and to accept his will; according to the logic of the Gospel nothing is more productive and fruitful than listening to and accepting the Word of the Lord, which comes from the Gospel, from the Bible. The Lord is always speaking to us!

Pope Francis

Pope Francis concludes his address by highlighting that an essential quality of our fruitfulness must be *generosity of heart*. God doesn't call us to be fruitful only so that we can admire the many baskets we fill! Instead, God calls us to be fruitful precisely so that we can share this fruit with others – holding out to others the blessings, the forgiveness, the hopes, the joys and the graces we have received through being a member of Christ's living body, the Church. Fruitfulness, therefore, makes disciples and evangelists out of each one of us – our fruitfulness becomes the fragrance attracting others to the fertile soil of Mother Church; it is the honey which sends us, like a vibrant hive of bees, out into the world looking for untold numbers of flowering souls who are open and desirous for the reception of the Good News of Jesus Christ! As Pope Francis continues,

Regarding God's love, regarding His mercy, the divine grace poured into our hearts, one single thing is asked in return: unreserved giving. Not one of us can buy salvation! Salvation is a free gift of the Lord . . . As we have received freely, so are we called to give freely (cf. Mt 10:8); imitating Mary, who, immediately upon receiving the Angel's announcement, went to share the gift of her fruitfulness with her relative Elizabeth. Because if everything has been given to us, then everything must be passed on. How? By allowing the Holy Spirit to make of us a gift for others . . . Let us learn from Mary, who kept her gaze, constantly fixed on the Son and her face became "the face that looked most like Christ's" (Dante, Paradiso, XXXII, 87).

Pope Francis, Angelus, 8 December 2014

It was Mary's fruitfulness, therefore, which made her go "with haste" (Lk 1:39) to visit Elizabeth, and Elizabeth, in turn, filled with the Holy Spirit, was able to acknowledge and proclaim the arrival of God's flawless blossom tree with the words "Blessed are you among women, and blessed is the fruit of your womb!" (Lk 1:42).



Fr Gerard Mary Toman, OFM Conv.

St Maximilian Maria Kolbe

The Blessed Trinity, the Immaculata and Godly fruitfulness

In one of his unpublished writings (no. 1284: *Various Writings*, Vol. II, pp. 2232–33), the Conventual Franciscan priest (St) Maximilian Maria Kolbe, describes how *every* grace is the fruit of God’s love. Written at the end of 1937 in Niepokalanów, Poland (the “City of the Immaculate Mother of God”, which he himself had founded in 1927), this short treatise is exceptional for the clarity and simplicity it brings to the presentation of theological themes which touch upon some of the greatest teachings and mysteries of the Christian faith. In the following pages, we will study this piece of writing to see what lessons on fruit/fruitfulness can be drawn from it and appreciated. Kolbe begins his reflection by articulating how:

“Everything comes from the eternal Father and returns to Him through the Son (Christ) and the Holy Spirit (Immaculata)”.

We understand by this, that God-the-Father is the font, origin and source of *all* that is: God-the-Father is, therefore, the *Father of all Fruitfulness*. Everything that flows from the Father is communicated *through* and *in* His eternal, co-equal and only begotten Son. We recall the words of the Niceno-Constantinopolitan Creed, by which we profess belief in the eternal Word of God being “born of the Father before all ages, God from God, Light from Light, true God from true God, begotten, not made, consubstantial with the Father; through Him all things were made” and that “for us men and for our salvation, He came down from heaven, and by the Holy Spirit was incarnate of the Virgin Mary and became man” in Christ Jesus.

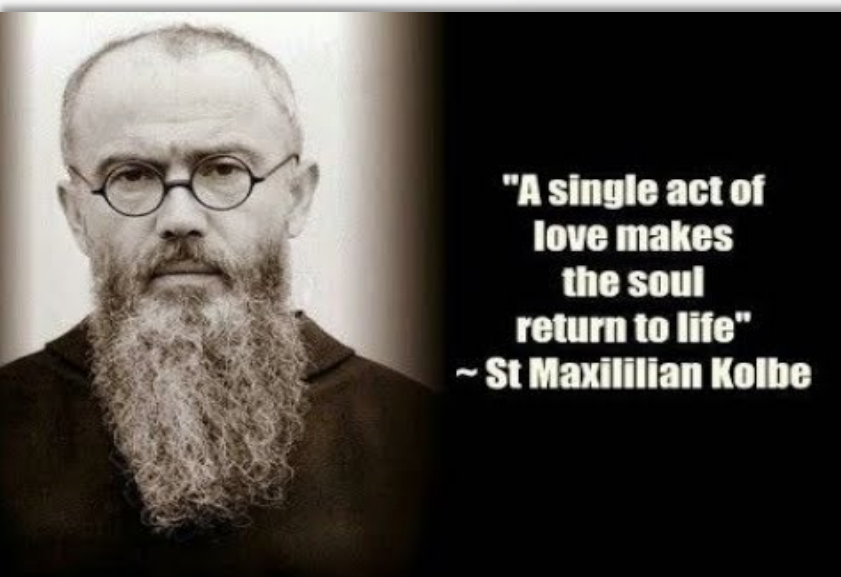
For Kolbe, God-the-Son is akin to being both the sower and the gatherer for His Heavenly Father – everything goes out of the Father *through* Him, and returns to the Father *by means* of Him. We can think here of Christ’s own words in the Gospel, “All things have been delivered to me by my Father; and no one knows the Son except the Father, and no one knows the Father except the Son and any one to whom the Son chooses to reveal Him” (Mt 11:27, Cf. Lk 10:22). And again, “I am the way, and the truth, and the life; no one comes to the Father, but by me” (Jn 14:6). In terms of fruitfulness, as His Father is the Vinedresser, Christ is the Vine Itself (Jn 15).

Anyone who has studied Kolbe's writings will be familiar with the dynamic of all things ebbing out of the Father, and flowing back to Him (through Christ). Though Christ is NOT a creature, all creation was made "through Him and for Him" (Col 1:16). This *exitus et reditus* (exit and return) dynamic isn't, to be sure, a Kolbian innovation. In fact, this cosmological framework can be found, throughout the centuries, in the works of many Christian writers and was, itself, largely drawn from the neoplatonic tradition (Cf. Proclus, *The Elements of Theology*, nos. 33, 37). In its simplest Christian presentation, God creates (*exitus*) and then creatures seek to return (*reditus*) to their Creator (Cf. St Thomas Aquinas, "All things desire God as their end" ("*omnia appetunt Deum ut finem*", *Summa Theologiae*, I, q.44, a.4, ad.3)). The works of the great Franciscan theological Master, St Bonaventure, are likewise replete with the *exitus et reditus* dynamic (Cf. Preface to Commentary on the Book of Sentences, The Itinerarium and the Gospel Commentaries).

For Kolbe, *God's love* is the creative, fruitful and unifying force throughout the universe. Here, rational creatures (angels and humans) occupy a graced place in the *exitus et reditus* dynamic, for they possess the capacity to love God consciously and unite themselves to Him, evermore perfectly, through love. It is into this cosmological framework, that Kolbe introduces Mary, her Immaculate Conception and her Heavenly Bridegroom – the Holy Spirit. For Kolbe, the mystical marriage between the Holy Spirit (the Third Divine Person of the Blessed Trinity) and the Blessed Virgin, is a source of unstemmed reflection. Elsewhere in his writings, Kolbe explains how the Holy Spirit is the *uncreated*, eternal, Immaculate Conception:

In a way incomparably more rigorous, more interior, more essential, the Holy Spirit lives in the soul of the Immaculata [Mary], in her being and *makes her fruitful*, and that from the first moment of her existence for her whole life, that is forever. This Uncreated Immaculate Conception immaculately conceives in the womb of Mary's soul, divine life, that is her Immaculate Conception."

St Maximilian Maria Kolbe, *Writings*, no. 1318



Back to the writing at hand, Kolbe continues by outlining how, since Mary's "union with Jesus and of Jesus with God the Father is most perfect, by being united to the Immaculata, we are united with Jesus and the Heavenly Father" (Kolbe, *Writings*, no. 1284). So, by choosing to unite ourselves with our heavenly Mother – who is most perfectly united to her Divine Son – we can be sure that our pilgrimage to see the Father's face (Cf. Rev 22:4) is being walked upon via the surest road. Replying to the obligation: "why not just unite ourselves to Jesus directly?", we must be sure to reiterate our intentions: it is *not* a question of whether or not we should unite ourselves with Jesus directly, but rather, asking ourselves the question: "what is the best/surest way for us to do this?". Rather than rely upon our own efforts, sentiments and judgements, we chose to humbly present ourselves to Our Lady, entrusting our entire selves to her (like Jesus Himself did within her womb), so that our sanctification and earthly sojourn unfolds under the watchful eye and solicitude of the Mother of Our Saviour. Kolbe then writes something truly remarkable:

Every grace is the fruit of the love of the Holy Spirit and of the Immaculata.

St Maximilian Maria Kolbe, *Writings*, no. 1284

Here Kolbe has a twofold meaning in mind. Firstly, that the fruit of the union of the Holy Spirit and the Blessed Virgin Mary – at the Annunciation – was Jesus Christ Himself, *through Whom* all graces come (Cf. Rom 5:17). Indeed, our holy Catholic faith teaches us that *all grace* since the Fall, has been given to man on account of Christ's merits, and Mary is the Mother of our Saviour in the flesh (Cf. Lk 1:42).

Kolbe's second meaning is that, in Christ and through Christ, by the power and efficacy of His grace, we become the adopted children of God (through the Sacrament of Baptism). In this sense, just as Mary is the mother of Christ in the flesh, so too, the Blessed Virgin can rightfully be titled "Mother of Grace", precisely because through her Divine Son, countless souls have been born again to God.

The grace of Christ is the gratuitous gift that God makes to us of His own life, infused by the Holy Spirit into our soul to heal it of sin and to sanctify it. It is the *sanctifying* or *deifying grace* received in Baptism [Justification begins]. It is in us the source of the work of sanctification . . .

Grace is first and foremost the gift of the Spirit who justifies and sanctifies us. But grace also includes the gifts that the Spirit grants us to associate us with his work, to enable us to collaborate in the salvation of others and in the growth of the Body of Christ, the Church.

Catechism of the Catholic Church (CCC), §§1999, 2003

It does us well to remember that, as Christians, we must affirm not only that the grace of Christ is *absolutely necessary* for justification before God, but further still, that without the prevenient (antecedent/anticipatory) inspiration and aid of the Holy Spirit, man is unable to believe, hope, love or be repentant, as is required for the grace of justification to be bestowed upon him (Cf. Council of Trent, *Decree on Justification*, 1547).

Kolbe – always underlining the mystical nuptial/spousal relationship between the Holy Spirit and Mary – posits that whatever is done by both the incarnate God-the-Son, and God-the-Holy-Spirit, inevitably and necessarily implicates the Blessed Virgin. So, for Kolbe, Mary's fruitfulness is both of the flesh and of the spirit – of both a natural and supernatural order.

The fruit of God's constant love toward the Immaculata is Jesus and His mystical members, the souls of men regenerated in Him by the Father and by Her [Mary] (by the Holy Spirit).

St Maximilian Maria Kolbe, *Writings*, no. 1284

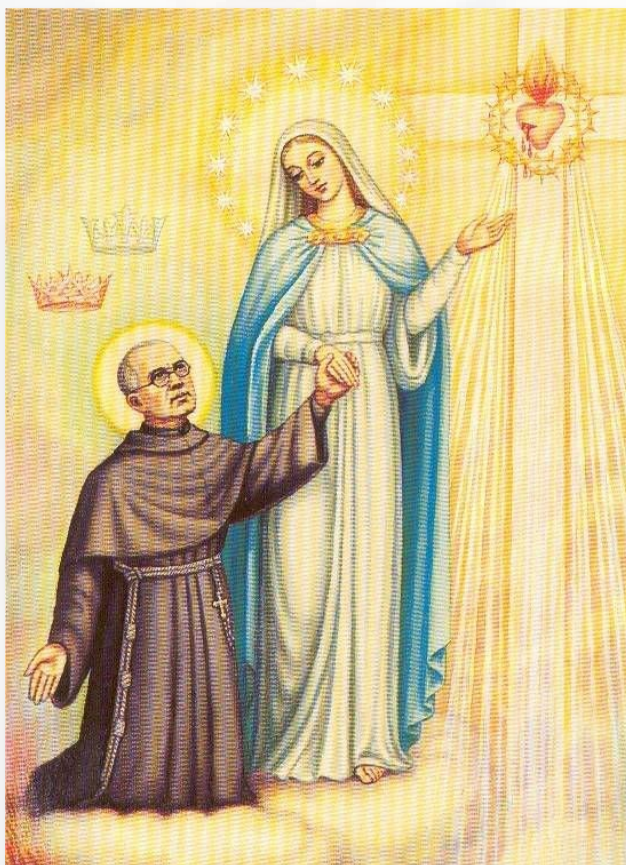
For Kolbe, the Triune God's *eternal fruitfulness* is most wonderfully mirrored, in creation, in the Blessed Virgin Mary conceiving through the power of the Holy Spirit. Mary gives birth to Christ, while remaining always a virgin, just as God the Father eternally begets His Son without any diminution, diminishment, detriment or haemorrhaging done to His Glory or His Own self. As Mother of God, Mary is fruitful both naturally and supernaturally – indeed, she possesses a limitless fruitfulness precisely because she has belonged to God alone from the first instance of her existence. Each Divine Person of the Blessed Trinity have, in a manner of speaking, freely chosen to rely upon her and to make use of her bodily and spiritual gifts, for the salvation of souls.



I will end this reflection with an extended quotation from the published writings of Kolbe which we have been studying. This will allow the stream of his theological reflection to be better appreciated and understood:

From eternity, the Father begets the Son, and the Holy Spirit proceeds from both. To be more and more of the Immaculata, to belong to her more profoundly, and so let fly more and more the wings of love, especially toward the Most Sacred Heart of Jesus and the manifestations of His love. The womb of the Immaculata, the crib, the infancy in the arms and under the gaze of the Immaculata, life hidden in the little house of Nazareth, apostolic activity, patience in persecution, poverty, and so on, and death on the Cross and the Resurrection, and the Eucharist . . . God the Father is the Father, the Immaculata is the Mother and Mistress of the House, Jesus in the Blessed Sacrament of the altar is the firstborn son and our Brother. All younger brothers and sisters, for their part, strive to imitate their elder Brother in loving and honouring God and the Immaculata, our common parents. From the Immaculata they learn to love their divine elder Brother, the prototype, the ideal of holiness, who deigned to descend from Heaven to become flesh in her and take up residence among us in the tabernacle.

St Maximilian Maria Kolbe, *Writings*, no. 1284



Fr Gerard Mary Toman, OFM Conv.

Sacred Scripture

The Biblical Presentation on Fruit/Fruitfulness

In the Greek of the New Testament, the most common word for “fruit” is καρπός (*karpos*). More broadly, *karpos* can also be understood to mean: produce, the result (of an action), an outcome and offspring. The adjectival form, *karpophoros*, meaning “fruitful, fruit bearing” is found only once in the New Testament (Acts 14:17). Here, St Paul describes the kindness of the Living God Who, “did good and gave you rains from heaven, and fruitful seasons, satisfying your hearts with food and gladness”. In terms of etymology, a study of the root of the word *karpos* indicates that it originally meant “what is plucked or reaped” (Cf. found also in Latin: *carpō* “to pluck off”). In the Septuagint (the most important Greek version of the Old Testament, finished c. 132 BC) the word *karpos* is used to translate as many as ten different Hebrew words for fruit (for example, *parah*: fruit; *yevul*: produce/harvest; *zimrah*: best fruits; *bikkurim*: first fruits, and so forth).

Old Testament

That the Old Testament has such a rich vocabulary to describe the concept of fruit/fruitfulness should come as no surprise. For example, in the very first chapter of the first book in the Bible (book of Genesis) the word “fruit/fruitful” is mentioned six times. In this first chapter of the Bible, the fruitfulness of God can be seen, in the natural world, through the created works of His hands. Here, man’s vocation (as male and female) to *be fruitful* is established. Just as God had told the animals to “Be fruitful and multiply and fill the waters in the seas . . .” (Gen 1:22), so too, God tells Adam and Eve to “Be fruitful and multiply, and fill the earth and subdue it” (Gen 1:28). God had created man – male and female – “in His own image” (Gen 1:27). Mankind is mandated to honour the Divine Image they bear by partaking in the fruitfulness of their Creator.

From this initial scene of the glorious, unspoiled fruitfulness found in the Garden of Eden, we encounter, two chapters later, fruit under another aspect. This time, set among the orchestra of all of creation is “the fruit of the tree which is in the midst of the garden” (Gen 3:3) that is, the Tree of the Knowledge of Good and Evil (Cf. Gen 2:17). God had forbidden the man (Adam) and his wife (Eve) from even touching this tree – let alone eating of its fruit. Yet Eve, seeing that “the tree was good for food, and that it was a delight to the eyes . . . took of its fruit and ate; and she also gave some to her husband, and he ate” (Gen 3:6). Thus, through our first parents’ disobedience, sin came into the world, and with that, all the dreadful effects of sin, including both the destruction of our intimacy/friendship with God and bodily death. From this moment on, a recurring theme in Sacred Scripture is the discerning of fruit, so as to establish the moral quality/character of a person or action.

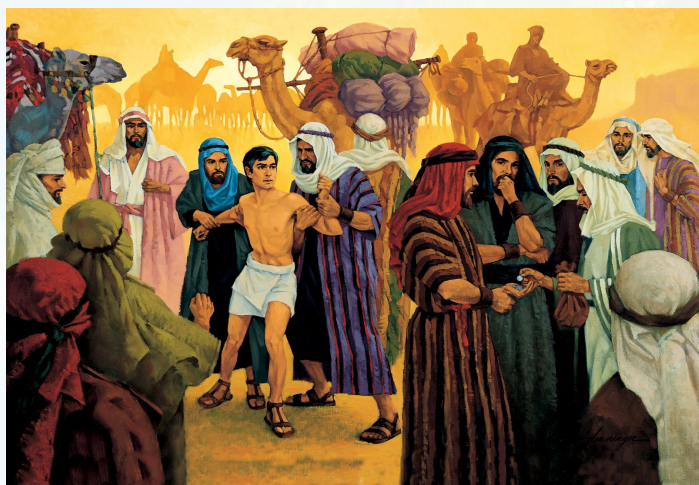
After the flood, God said the very same words to Noah that He had said to Adam and Eve before the Fall “be fruitful and multiply” (Gen 8:17; 9:1,7). Here, God is reiterating the essential goodness of mankind, despite his fallen condition and his newly acquired struggle with concupiscence. Both before the Fall and after it, God calls mankind to be fruitful. The promise of fruitfulness, therefore, is woven into all of God’s relationships with those who love Him. For example, in the covenant God made with Abraham, God promised Abraham “you shall be the father of a multitude of nations . . . I will make you *exceedingly fruitful*” (Gen 17: 5–6) – with this fruitfulness extending to his offspring (Cf. Ishmael, Gen 17:20). And just as God had commanded man to be fruitful and multiply, so too, in a wonderful imitation of God, man, in turn, ought to invoke a blessing on his own children “God Almighty bless you and make you fruitful and multiply you” (Isaac blessing Jacob, Gen 28:1).



Three times in the Old Testament, children are referred to as being “fruit of the womb” (Gen 30:2; Ps 127 [126]:3; Is 13:18). Elsewhere, children are described as being the “fruit of your/ my body” (Ps 131:11; Mic 6:7) or the “offspring of the womb” (Hos 9:16). We must pause here and ask ourselves some hard questions, first among which is: “do we, or the societies in which we live, truly see children – especially the unborn – as being God-willed *fruit?*” A further question would be: “do we see the bearing of children as being something precious to God and as an essential element in forming our true identity and vocation as men and women?” Broadening the area of self-reflection, as Catholics, we must always strive to understand that the Church’s teaching on contraception (so often misunderstood, denigrated and challenged) simply reverences God’s command for married love to *be fruitful*, or at the very least, for married couples not to seek to deliberately render sterile/barren a union which God has commissioned to proclaim the wonder of new human life, as it witnesses to the divine fruitfulness and goodness of God.

Fecundity is a gift, *an end of marriage*, for conjugal love naturally tends to be fruitful. A child does not come from outside as something added on to the mutual love of the spouses, but springs from the very heart of that mutual giving, as its fruit and fulfilment. So the Church, which “is on the side of life” [*Familiaris consortio*, §30], teaches that “it is necessary that each and every marriage act remain ordered *per se* in the procreation of human life” [*Humanae Vitae*, §11].

In Sacred Scripture, God's command for us to be fruitful isn't conditional on our living in a good environment or under favourable circumstances. Instead, we are called to be fruitful wherever God places us, and in every season and circumstance of life. Like, for example, the



patriarch Joseph, who was sold into slavery by his own brothers! Through his humble and trusting obedience to God during the many years of his unjust exile, and through withstanding terrible trials and dangers with the assistance of God, Joseph was brought to a place where he was greatly respected by Pharaoh and even had a family of his own. On beholding his sons, Joseph exclaimed “God has made me fruitful in the

land of my affliction” (Gen 41:52). May each of us be able to give voice to this beautiful exclamation during the trials and hardships of our lives!

In fact, with almost thirty references to “fruit/fruitful” in the book of Genesis, we could say that will find in this first book of the Bible, a profound scriptural testimony to God's creative fruitfulness. God binds man to a commitment to being fruitful which, in turn, leads to human society and the entire world being ordered and characterised as God wills it to be. It shouldn't be surprising, therefore, to find in the Old Law, a careful weaving together of man and his surrounding natural environment, with even precepts given regarding agricultural practices which respect the goodness of God's creation, and the need for man to exercise good stewardship over it. For example, every seventh year, olive orchards and vineyards were to be left fallow; this would not only afford poor people and wild animals an opportunity to be fed, but it would also provide the soil with an opportunity to regenerate (Ex 23:10–11). Likewise, in order to preserve God's fertile land, it was not permitted to destroy fruit trees during a war (Deut 20:19). Clearly, intrinsic to God's call for man to be fruitful, is that man also respects and cultivates the countless other blessings of God's creative fruitfulness, even though these fall beneath the dignity and heights that God has raised man to.



Just as the Holy Bible begins with a book teeming with life, bounty and abundance, so too, the first psalm of the psalter (which contains one hundred and fifty psalms) is very concerned with fruitfulness. In this opening psalm, the beauty of Godly virtue is described in the language of verdant fruitfulness, wherein a life lived with God leads to growth and flourishing

happy indeed is the man, who follows not the counsel of the wicked . . . but whose delight is in the law of the Lord and who ponders his law day and night. He is like a tree that is planted beside the flowing waters, that yields its fruit in due season and whose leaves shall never fade; and all that he does shall prosper.

Ps 1

Here, as throughout the whole of the Old Testament, we see the symbolic language of fruit being used, both in relation to God's blessing and His punishment. The Lord rewards the virtuous who speak and act well, "Tell the righteous that it shall be well with them, for they shall eat the fruit of their deeds" (Is 3:10). This salvific reality is reiterated in many other places (Cf. Pr 12:14, "From the fruit of his words a man is satisfied with good"). Similarly, evil-doers and the disobedient will receive the wages of their sins ("I will punish you according to the fruit of your doings, says the Lord", Jer 21:14).

However, beyond God directly punishing sinners (Cf. Jer 6:19) and rewarding the righteous (Cf. Jer 17:10), there are also the consequences – often foreseeable – that must be borne whenever the natural law is violated. In this respect, obstinate sinners and the hard of heart "shall eat the fruit of their way and be sated with their own devices" (Pr 1:31). The New Testament will both affirm and further develop the use of such language when calling people to repentance (cf. John the Baptist: "every tree therefore that does not bear good fruit is cut down and thrown into the fire", Mt 3:10). Interestingly, in both the Old and New Testament, a man's words are called "the fruit of his mouth/lips" (Cf. Pr 12:14; 18:20; Heb 13:15).

Before turning to the New Testament, it is important for us to realise that, in many respects, God's commandment for us to "Be fruitful!" breathes into the human condition a type of inevitability – each of us *will* bear fruit. The matter therefore becomes the discerning of whether the fruit we bear is good fruit, or bad. Human beings have the innate capacity to partake in God's creative goodness, but this is a gift and power which can so easily be misplaced and misused. Despite the trials, temptations and fatigues that can arise from our obligation to live fruitful, holy lives, we must never begrudge or take for granted our vocation to "Be fruitful!". Scripture teaches us that even our words are fruits, meaning that, at the end of each day, we ought to make an honest assessment concerning the moral quality of the harvest that we have reaped that very day "in my thoughts and in my words, in what I have done, and in what I have failed to do" (Confiteor/Penitential Act: Holy Mass).

New Testament

Good and ripe fruit

The first references to “fruit/bearing fruit” in the New Testament comes from the lips of John the Baptist. We recall how the Bible opened up with God’s commandment for Adam and Eve to “Be fruitful”. Well, here in the opening chapters of the New Testament, the voice crying in the wilderness – the voice preparing a straight way for the Lord in the desert – is employing the language of fruit in order to form the hearts and souls of God’s people for the arrival of the Saviour: “Bear fruit that befits repentance!” (Mt 3:8 Cf. Lk 3:8–9) cries John. In case one thinks that John was being a little wild, perhaps, a little too forceful, let us listen to the words of Jesus Himself – God Incarnate – just a few chapters later:

You will know them by their fruits . . . every sound tree bears good fruit, but the bad tree bears evil fruit. A sound tree cannot bear evil fruit, nor can a bad tree bear good fruit. Every tree that does not bear good fruit is cut down and thrown into the fire.

Mt 7:16–20

Similar evocative language and imagery would later be used by St Paul. When warning Christ’s faithful not to associate with either fornicators or impure men, nor the covetous/idolators or the disobedient, he writes:

for once you were darkness, but now you are light in the Lord; walk as children of light (for the fruit of light is found in all that is good and right and true) . . . Take no part in the unfruitful works of darkness, but instead expose them.

Eph 5:5–6

Here light (goodness) is described as *bearing fruit*, whereas evil (darkness) is cursed as being *unfruitful*. We can clearly see, therefore, how important it is that we, as God’s Holy People, obey our Loving Father in Heaven and so, live humbly and fruitfully. Then, before the eyes of the world, our holy, abundant, fertile and grace-drenched lives will stand in stark contrast to the lives of the wicked and unfruitful, whom the Apostle Jude describes as being,

waterless clouds, carried along by winds; fruitless trees in late autumn, twice dead, uprooted; wild waves of the sea, casting up the foam of their own shame; wandering stars for whom the nether gloom of darkness has been reserved for ever.

Jude 1:12–13

That the state of one's soul and the uprightness of one's heart can be judged by the quality/character of the fruits one bears, is a spiritual insight that Our Lord returns to often – “Either make the tree good, and its fruit good; or make the tree bad, and its fruit bad; for the tree is known by its fruit” (Mt 12:33, Cf. Lk 6:43–44). If, therefore, someone consistently chooses anything above the love of God (be it comfort, attending to the cares of the world, delight in riches etc.), then the Word of God in their life will, in the final analysis, prove “unfruitful” (Mt 13:22 – the Parable of the Sower). It is of note that, in Luke's account of this same passage, in the lives of those who are consumed by the cares and riches and pleasures of life, “their fruit does not mature” (Lk 8:14). This furnishes us with a profound spiritual insight; patience, penance, endurance and filial trust in God are all required if our fruits are not only to be good, but also are to be given the time needed for them to mature.

We must always be prepared, aided by the light of God's grace and formed by Christ's saving teachings, to discern what has first place in our hearts. If we haven't given God that first place, then nothing we do will, ultimately, be of any consequence or enduring value. It is precisely the presence of God in our soul – the indwelling of the Almighty within us – that provides us with the sap which then makes the leaves of our lives and our actions, verdant and fruitful.

Here, as an aside, it is important for us to understand, as Catholics, that the Church has never taught that we are saved/justified by Christ through “faith alone” (*sola fides*). Instead, we profess that we remain (and grow further) in a state of justification, through “faith cooperating with good works” (“*cooperante fide bonis operibus*”: Council of Trent, *Decree on Justification*). Developing this foundational Christian truth, John Paul II describes how “Grace, the fruit of the sacraments, is the irreplaceable condition for Christian living . . . if faith is not expressed in works, it is dead [cf. Jas 2:14–16] and cannot bear fruit unto eternal life” (*Fidei Depositum*, Apostolic Constitution on the publication of the Catechism, §3.5). Only when we rightly understand this reality, can we fully appreciate St Paul's encouragement for us each to “lead a life worthy of the Lord, fully pleasing to Him, bearing fruit in every good work and increasing in the knowledge of God” (Col 1:10).



We are therefore, given great courage when we hear Christ proclaim that the person who “hears the word and understands it . . . bears fruit, and yields, in one case a hundredfold, in another sixty, and in another thirty” (Mt 13:23, Cf. Mk 4:19–20). In our lives, therefore, we must guard against both *fruitlessness* and *unripe* fruit! That noted, even in our fruit-bearing we must remember that we don’t simply produce and gather fruit for here and now, but rather, Our Lord reminds us to look to the example of he who “gathers fruit for eternal life” (Jn 4:36). In

other words, God outlines how our fruitfulness, here and now, is connected with the evergreenness of Heaven, “where neither moth nor rust consumes” (Mt 6:19–20, Cf. Jas 5:3).

The Gospels teach us another sublime truth concerning our bearing fruit, namely, that unless we die to those areas in our lives which are not of God, then our capacity to bloom and flourish will be massively impaired, if not rendered entirely void. We can often associate the process of dying with only misery and diminishment, but that is not the lesson our holy faith instructs us. Employing the imagery of fruit, Our Lord teaches the following:

Truly, truly, I say to you, unless a grain of wheat falls into the earth and dies, it remains alone; but if it dies, it bears much fruit. He who loves his life loses it, and he who hates his life in this world will keep it for eternal life.

Jn 12:24–25

Here we discover that a crucial element of our coming to full life, full-fruitfulness in the Lord, is our dying. Not only in a literal sense (i.e. at the end of our mortal life), but especially in a spiritual and moral sense, here and now. When we have discerned that our lives have ceased to bear fruit, when we know that we have begun to fail in producing the flora-aroma of a wholesome, faithful, virtuous life, we must have the courage to ask the Lord to reveal to us all those areas, attitudes, behaviours and ways of speaking that we must die to. If the soil of our hearts has become hard and rocky, we must ask for God’s forgiveness, His mercy, His grace and His friendship so that we might no longer live for ourselves, but for Him and for the perfect fulfilment of His Holy Will.

Fruitfulness in Christ

Perhaps nowhere else in Sacred Scripture is there a more glorious description of Godly fruit/fruitfulness than in Chapter Fifteen of John's Gospel, a short extract of which is presented below

I am the true vine, and my Father is the vinedresser. Every branch of mine that bears no *fruit*, He takes away, and every branch that does bear *fruit* He prunes, that it may bear more *fruit*. You are already made clean by the word which I have spoken to you. Abide in me, and I in you. As the branch cannot bear *fruit* by itself, unless it abides in the vine, neither can you, unless you abide in me. I am the vine, you are the branches. He who abides in me, and I in him, he it is that bears much *fruit*, for apart from me you can do nothing. If a man does not abide in me, he is cast forth as a branch and withers; and the branches are gathered, thrown into the fire and burned. If you abide in me, and my words abide in you, ask whatever you will, and it shall be done for you. By this my Father is glorified, that you bear much *fruit*, and so prove to be my disciples. No longer do I call you servants . . . but I have called you friends, for all that I have heard from my Father I have made known to you. You did not choose me, but I chose you and appointed you that you should go and bear *fruit* and that your *fruit* should abide; so that whatever you ask the Father in my name, he may give it to you. This I command you, to love one another.

Jn 15:1–8, 15–17

An entire article could be penned on the brilliant light these verses shed on the tender love of the Triune God, and the unimaginable intimacy that the God of the Universe – our Father – is calling us to through Jesus Christ, in the Spirit. Here are some pithy lessons that we can glean from the above verses:

- Our salvific fruitfulness depends, entirely, on our remaining *in* Christ.
- Our bearing good fruit is a divine expectation/command.
- Faithfulness makes for fruitfulness.
- God alone increases our capacity to bear fruit.
- Without Christ, we can produce *nothing* of any value.
- God delights in our fruitfulness.
- God is given glory through our fruitfulness in Christ.
- Divine friendship leads to fruitfulness.
- Love is the most precious fruit we can ever bear.

Here, in this Gospel-within-the-Gospels, we are taught that having personal, intimate communion with Jesus is *the* key to our being able to live lives of superabundant fruitfulness. We aren't fruitful simply through knowledge of Christ, we are made fruitful through *being joined to Him* – through being *living members* of His Mystical body. We begin to see here, how essential the Sacraments are in our living lives of fruitfulness. In the Sacrament of Penance, our hearts are opened to the healing touch of Christ, Who immediately stops our internal haemorrhaging which arose through sin. Christ washes our souls clean in His Precious Blood, and so He waters and nourishes our souls, allowing them to be rendered fruitful and life-filled again through His grace. In the Holy Eucharist, we are fed and nourished by the very Body and Blood of Christ, and so our souls find themselves inebriated with the Life of the Vine; at every Holy Mass our Heavenly Father, as the vinedresser, first cleanses us through His word (Scripture), and then prunes our souls by the action of the Holy Spirit, meaning that, when we receive the true flesh and blood of His Divine Son, we find ourselves capable of bearing even more fruit.

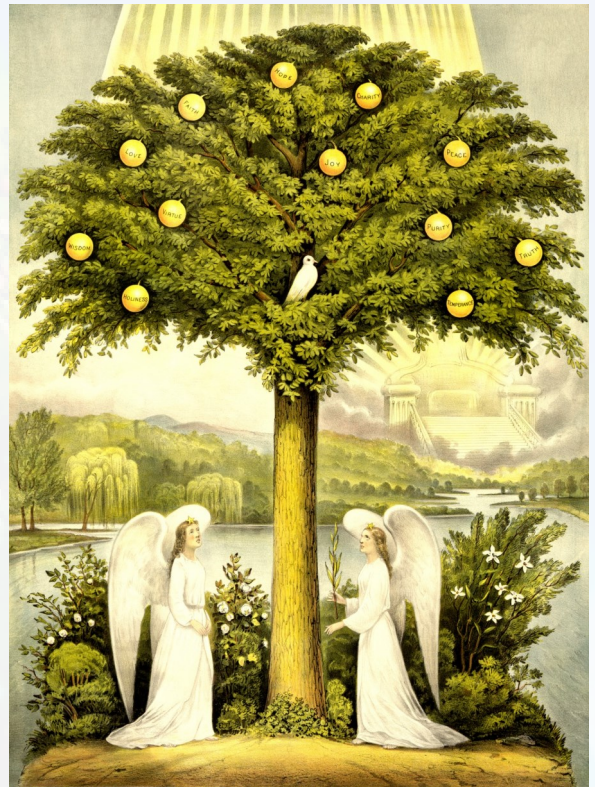
Someone who had first-hand experience regarding the absolute necessity of encountering Christ, growing in knowledge of Christ, relying completely on Christ and arriving at perfect love of Christ, was St Paul. Throughout his epistles, we see the great Apostle to the Gentiles tying intimacy with Christ to our being fruitful. St Paul declares, “my brethren, you have died to the law through the body of Christ . . . in order that we may bear fruit for God” (Rom 7:4). In the same letter he explains how, through Baptism into Christ Jesus (Rom 6:3) and the work of the Holy Spirit, we have been made “children of God” (Rom 8:16) who now possess “the first fruits of the Spirit” (Rom 8:23). Elsewhere St Paul outlines how, “the fruit of the Spirit is love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, gentleness, self-control” (Gal 5:22). Thus, St Paul is reminding us of the simple truth that all good fruit/fruitfulness has its origins in God; only through our being joined to God, through Christ our Saviour, can we bear worthy fruit.

First fruits

Throughout the pages of the New Testament, we find a developed concept of “first fruits”. The Apostle James outlines the broad landscape in which God the Father “brought us [i.e. the whole of humanity] forth by the Word of Truth [i.e. Christ] that we should be a kind of first fruits of his creatures” (Jas 1:18). So, mankind – through the Eternal Word – was set above all earthly creatures. We move now to how mankind was redeemed by Christ, after having fallen into the chains of sin. St Paul explains how Jesus, having been raised from the dead, can be understood as being “the *first fruits* of those who have fallen asleep” (1 Cor 15:20). Christ became true man (while remaining true God) and suffered, died and was buried for our sakes. However, in rising from the dead, He broke the power of death, so that all who believe in Him might not die, but have eternal life (cf. Jn 3:15–16). Christ is head of His body the Church, and where Christ leads, His faithful sheep will follow. And what do we find in the final book of the Bible, but the saved “who follow the Lamb wherever He goes; these have been redeemed from mankind as first fruits for God and the Lamb” (Rev 14:4). The Old Testament appreciation regarding the importance of offering God our “first fruits”, is brought to an astonishing new clarity and depth in the light of the incarnate of God, and in His saving work.

The poetry and perfection of Scripture

Just as the first book of the Bible, Genesis, is like an ode to divine fruitfulness – a symphony of all the ways in which God’s fruitfulness has been impressed, indelibly and purposefully, upon man’s body and his vocation by God Himself – so too, the final chapter of the very last book of the Bible reiterates this sacred theme. What do we find here in the final section of written Divine Revelation? The Tree of Life! This tree was first described in the second chapter of Genesis (Gen 2:9) where it appeared to be situated in the midst of the Garden of Eden alongside the Tree of the Knowledge of Good and Evil. However, man sinned (by eating the latter’s fruit) and so God, in order to prevent man from also eating of the Tree of Life, drove him out of the Garden, placing the cherubim on guard, and a flaming sword which turned every way, to guard the way to the Tree of Life. We can imagine fallen man’s final glimpse of the Tree of Life, before his being evicted into a world of thorns, lust, pain, decay and death.



Although various tangential mentions to a tree of life are made in the Old Testament book of Proverbs (Cf. Pr 3:18, 11:30, 13:12; 15:4) the next explicit reference/description of the actual Tree of Life after the book of Genesis (the first book of the Bible), is found in the Book of Revelation (the final book of the Bible). Here our Risen and Glorious Lord declares the following: “To him who conquers, I will grant to eat of the Tree of Life, which is in the paradise of God” (Rev 2:7). Then, in the final chapter of the book we find the following:

Then he [i.e. one of the seven angels] showed me the river of the water of life, bright as crystal, flowing from the throne of God and of the Lamb through the middle of the street of the city; also, on either side of the river, the Tree of Life with its twelve kinds of fruit, yielding its fruit each month; and the leaves of the tree were for the healing of the nations.

Rev 22: 1–2

Blessed are those who wash their robes [i.e. in the blood of the Lamb] that they may have the right to the Tree of Life and that they may enter the city by the gates.

Rev 22:14

The Book of Revelation ends with the words “Amen. Come, Lord Jesus! The grace of the Lord Jesus be with all the saints. Amen” (Rev 22:20–21).

Our pilgrim journey looking at the theme of fruit and fruitfulness throughout the pages of Sacred Scripture has led us to a brief glimpse of the vibrant glory and eternal abundance of Heaven, where the Lamb of God is the light of the city, and where the Tree of Life produces perpetual fruit. Even allowing for the figurative and poetic language used to describe realities which lie beyond man’s ability to fully capture in words, there remains the wonderful divinely-inspired insight that fruit and fruitfulness, in some remarkable manner, will remain an eternal reality. However, this stands to reason when we consider that the Blessed and Triune God is the eternal font of all that is. Just as God created a material world out of nothing – making it team with life beyond all measure – so too, for those who love Him, He has prepared a new Heaven and a new earth (cf. 2 Pet 3:13; Rev 21:1), whose beauty and capacity to reflect His own goodness and fecundity is beyond our current ability to imagine, let alone to describe.

Fr Gerard Mary Toman, OFM Conv.



Looking to the Future with Joyful Hope from Within the Challenges of the Present

Looking to the future and hoping in the future from within the *now of tomorrow*. What does this mean? Simply put, it means allowing a vision of the future to interrupt the *now of today*.

Most of our awareness and thinking takes place within a framework determined by the immediate concerns of the present and is shaped by our ongoing reaction to these concerns. While this is in itself good and helps us to navigate our way through the day, and aids us in dealing with, and resolving, problems we encounter in our daily life, it also keeps us stuck in a mode of awareness that has little room for a wider perspective and broadened horizons.

Looking around us at the world now, with so much to discourage and challenge us, can very easily lead to despair or at least a deep concern over what the future holds. If we tend to over-interpret our present reality with reference solely to current points of reference, we all too easily become captive to a closed-loop mentality that prevents us from gazing hopefully into the future. This is what I mean by the *now of today*. On the other hand, the *now of yesterday* is a nostalgic and anti-realistic mindset that negatively interprets today's realities through the lens of an over-idealised past. Here, the temptation is to revert to what was seen as good in the past as a solution to the problems of today.

This is as much a denial of reality as the *now of today* mentality is a denial of the imaginative possibilities already at work in the present. Both of these mindsets arise from a fear-based need for control in a time of uncertainty and change. An openness to the myriad hopeful possibilities of the future reflects a willingness to allow reality to unfold according to the often-indiscernible patterns and rhythms continuously at work in a world that is held in a loving embrace by its Creator. In this view, the past, in all its rich depths is valued for how it roots us in a continually unfolding tradition; and the present is lived in courageously in all its reality. Just as the past opened into the present and enabled us through its wisdom to live fully in the present, so the present opens us to what lies ahead.

There is a dynamic tension within the present that commits us to the “now” but also strains towards the future. We recognise this in how our activities in the present are also commitments towards the future. When we live within this dynamic tension, we take up the challenges of these future commitments, not delaying or procrastinating, or wishing things were otherwise, we begin to live in the *now of tomorrow*. When we allow the pull of the past to draw us into a fear of the future or a looking back to how perfect everything was in the past; or when we become paralysed by the challenges of the present and are unable to visualise future possibilities, we step out of the current of this dynamic tension and become locked into a static “now” that robs us of the imaginative capacity to envision a hopeful tomorrow.

The *now of tomorrow* is a viewpoint from within the present moment that looks to the future and hopes in the future, and allows this perspective of the future to interrupt the present. When we engage this dynamic tension straining towards the future, we commit more fully to a “now” charged with all the open-ended possibilities of a hopeful future. By living faithfully the *now of tomorrow*, anchoring ourselves in the present while simultaneously gazing with hope towards the unfolding of what is to come, we begin to see how the future is no longer viewed as our creation or the product of our plans, but rather, in this unified dynamism of past, present and future, the kingdom of God is seen to emerge as the gradual revealing of a progressively evolving reality.

Christ’s parables of the kingdom reflect this envisioning of a future viewed through the hope-filled lens of today. What is also clear in these parables, particularly those that employ the metaphors of trees and crops and seeds, is that what is envisioned is a future fruitfulness because of choices made and acted upon in the present. Future fruitfulness stands in contrast to an achieved productivity or an accomplished result. There is a difference when we plan and then perform towards achievement and productivity, because then it becomes our work, and not the Lord’s, and so it is we who are responsible for the outcome, and indeed for the success of the outcome. Not only does this approach exclude the Lord’s will and action, but it also limits the outcome to what is possible only by human endeavour.

Furthermore, this induces a functional and instrumental mentality wherein control and domination of reality is the measure by which we determine the success of our work. Then it is simply our own kingdom towards which we work. This is the difference between two spiritual dispositions. The first generously, but mistakenly asks “what can I do for God?” Here, I am at the centre and it is I who wills, acts, and accomplishes. I act on behalf of and for God who becomes the “recipient” of my good works. The second disposition humbly asks “how can I allow God to work through me?” Here, God and His Will are at the centre, and I become both the open channel and grateful recipient of God’s loving action.

This distinction between two spiritual dispositions, while subtle, is real, and reveals where the centre of spiritual gravity in my heart rests. It also determines whether my life is in service to my own spiritual vision and is primarily about producing successful results for God, or whether I am a humble servant of God who allows Him to generate a flourishing fruitfulness of His kingdom through me. When we allow the Lord to work through us for the growth of the Lord’s kingdom then the outcome is an abundant fruitfulness that emerges gradually and unobtrusively. And often, in spite of our best efforts this fruitfulness emerges in ways and in places that we have not envisaged or planned for. Fruitfulness emerges when we relinquish control and learn to trust in God’s wisdom, and to have faith in God’s promises to us.

How are we to live in anticipation of this future fruitfulness here and now in the present? By taking to heart the words of the Lord spoken to us through the prophet Jeremiah, “For surely I know the plans I have for you, plans for your welfare and not for harm, to give you a future with hope” (Jer 29:11). By seeking signs of a hopeful future within the challenges of today, and nurturing and encouraging their growth. By living with a sensitivity and a gracious acceptance of the Will of God given to us in the promptings of the Holy Spirit. Then to discern with trust and patience the Spirit’s urgings, and finally to respond generously and courageously.

To live joyfully within the dynamic tension of the challenges of the hopeful present and the not-as-yet fruitfulness of the future (in other words, to live joyfully in the *now of tomorrow*) means that we trust that God knows what He is doing. That the future that He has planned for us begins to take shape within the mysterious and yet familiar unfolding of His kingdom, both within us and among us. That we live faithfully and with trust in the uncertainty and challenge of the present. That we look towards the unfolding of His kingdom by being actively sensitive, receptive, discerning and responsive to His loving will in the here and now that is generously open to the future.

Friar Terence Bateman, OFM Conv.



But seek ye first the kingdom of
God, and his righteousness; and
all these things shall be added
unto you.

–Matthew 6:33



Fruitfulness: A prayer poem.

Touch of God,
Giver of Life,
speak unto these deadened bones;
make them live, and move and hope again,
and so flower through the scent of Your sweet grace.
Lord of All,
King of Light,
turn this yellowed desert green,
open up the purpled skies,
and let our whitened lives be deluged with your fertile love.
Then, may every hand of ours bear fitting fruit,
watered by the opened side of Christ.
And on the spot where, in Your Love, You planted me,
I will breathe and blossom in Your glowing shade;
found faithful and resilient in due season,
with youthful, unfurled leaves that never fade.
And so, within my soul and life,
Your loving Will shall bud and heave,
and through Your holy cultivation,
I shall stand tall,
and bear sweet fruit beneath Your Sun.

Fr Gerard Mary Toman, OFM Conv.

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