

Trinità dei Monti – Rome – 17 October 2026 – Colloquium on *Mater Admirabilis*

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Thank you very much for your invitation to take part in this colloquium. Thanks to you, I have become interested in Mater as I had never taken the time to do before, and I must say that this work has fascinated and nourished me. What I am going to tell you is my reading of the fresco, a reading that will be both symbolic and spiritual, rooted in the spirituality of Saint Madeleine-Sophie Barat, the foundress of our congregation.

In doing this work I realised how much **this fresco expresses Madeleine-Sophie's original intuition**: to form women, adorers of the Heart of Jesus, who would become wives and mothers, educators of their children and influential on their husbands – I might even say educators of their husbands – and thus to form women who would take part in the transformation of the world. This mission presupposed religious who were themselves formed so that it could succeed.

A few words on the importance of the Virgin Mary in our congregation.

Madeleine-Sophie says this in a conference of 1846: “(...) We have the honour of bearing the name of religious of the Sacred Heart of Jesus and Mary; if we are not called that, it is for the sake of brevity, and we cannot separate these two hearts in our love.”¹

Our first Constitutions, written by M.S. Barat in 1815, stress this: “(...) The religious of the Society will show themselves **worthy spouses of the Sacred Heart of Jesus**, and that by **the mediation of the Heart of Mary**, they will offer to Him **the hearts of an innumerable multitude of children** whom they will have formed upon the model of His own, and who will spread in the world His worship, love and glory.”²

[slide 1, fresco] St Madeleine-Sophie Barat loved Mater very much from the start: “Your little Blessed Virgin, [she said], made in the corridor **[slides 2 and 3]** is not bad at all... On my way to the gallery, I often take a detour to go and look at her; **she draws me**; she is the age of our pupils and speaks to me of that youth to which I have vowed my life for the love of the Heart of Our Divine Spouse.”³ **[Slide 4, Fresco]**

Madeleine-Sophie saw a deep link between Mater and our educational mission.

How is this expressed in our fresco? That is what I would like to explore here.

Let us take the time to contemplate it. Here we are in the presence of Mater.

Pauline Perdrau chose to depict the Virgin Mary in the Temple of Jerusalem, following a very ancient tradition from the apocryphal gospels, according to which Mary was consecrated to the Lord from her birth and, as such, given to the Temple of Jerusalem at the age of three, as the young Samuel had been entrusted to the priest Eli by his mother Hannah.

In the congregation we celebrate **the Presentation of Mary in the Temple** every 21 November, **[slide 5, Joigny stained-glass window]** a date very dear to the religious of the Sacred Heart, since it was on 21 November 1800 that Madeleine-Sophie consecrated herself to the Heart of Jesus with three other companions before this picture of the Virgin and Child. **[slide 6, Virgin**

¹ *Conferences LXV*, For the Holy Heart of Mary, 1846

² *Constitutions of the Society of the Sacred Heart*, 1815 – No. 186. XVIII.

³ *Les Loisirs de l'abbaye*, Pauline Perdrau, p. 18

of the Society] She always regarded that day as the day of the foundation of what she called “the little Society of the Sacred Heart of Jesus”.

The apocryphal gospels say that Mary was chosen by the High Priest to spin the purple destined for making the curtain of the Temple. The overall composition of the fresco thus takes up a classic theme of painting from the earliest times of the Church, that of the Virgin spinning. **[slide 7, Byzantine Virgin]**

Let us look at the fresco more closely, as a whole and in its details.

[slide 8, fresco]

Mary is seated, her eyes lowered and half open, **[slide 9]** her hands at rest; she has stopped spinning **[slide 10]**. **[slide 11, fresco]** A book is left open on the work basket, as if abandoned in the middle of reading. On her right, a lily bends slightly towards her in a curve that matches the shape of her body and answers the tilt of her head, turned the same way. On her left, the shaft of the distaff, whose straight vertical line may evoke a protective standard, a walking staff, a sturdy sentinel ready to support her.

This whole composition expresses a suspended moment: something is happening that is invisible, yet made visible by the grace of representation. The lily reveals it very profoundly yet delicately. It is a figure of the angel Gabriel, who is frequently depicted offering a white lily to the Virgin Mary at the moment of the Annunciation. There are many examples. **[slide 12 Botticelli and slide 13]**

[slide 14 Fresco] We are invited to contemplate this moment of secret intimacy that overwhelmed Mary’s heart, the moment when she heard the Word of the angel announcing that she would be the mother of the Saviour. The blue vase of the lily, which echoes the blue of the book’s cover, shows us that the Word proclaimed in the Bible (the Book) is made flesh in Mary, the mystical vessel who receives within her the Word of God.

Very early in the history of the Society, the best of our older pupils belonged to the congregations of the Children of Mary, and every 8 December, the feast of the Immaculate Heart of Mary, they carried a white lily in procession and offered it to Mary.

[slide 15 of the seal] **The lilies** that encircled our seal also symbolise purity and virginity – essentially the virginity of a heart that refuses God nothing, that gives itself totally, without calculation, in loving trust. Pauline Perdrau herself had been admitted among the Children of Mary at Trinità dei Monti before becoming a postulant and then a novice. Perhaps we too are called to be such lily-bearers, quietly announcing good news to those we meet?

[slide 16 fresco] **Mary, seated in the Temple, the dwelling of God, herself becomes the dwelling of God, the Temple of the Spirit.** Through her, the human body, and no longer the Temple of Jerusalem, becomes the dwelling of God among men. In the manner of icons, we are placed face to face with her, invited to let ourselves be led to her heart and beyond, towards the world that God comes to save.

Pauline wanted us, in a way, to be in the temple with Mary.

This is what she writes in the account she left of the history of the fresco:

“To represent Mary in the temple of Jerusalem, with her little distaff, seemed to me to answer the aim that each of us had set herself,⁴ the work basket of Mother de Coriolis was reproduced so that the illusion might be more complete. It could be all the more so because the paving of the fresco seemed to be a continuation of the corridor, and the great marble portico recalled that of Jerusalem.”⁵ [slide 17 fresco and parquet floor]

This is what St Madeleine-Sophie writes to one of her sisters: “Hasten to return to that interior life which must be ours”⁶; “To live this interior life, wholly hidden in God with Jesus Christ, so that the divine Master may give you light, strength and inspiration to form these young souls for Jesus Christ.”⁷

Likewise, our present Constitutions, written in 1882, spell it out: “In welcoming God's word, Mary gave Christ to the world. In receiving the life of Jesus, we give ourselves with Him so that all may have life.”⁸

[slide 18, Fresco] **We are contemplating a Christological mystery.** What draws us to Mater is the One who dwells in her, who is Christ. Mater does not look at us; she is humbly turned towards what is happening within her, and her whole attitude directs our gaze inwards, towards what is essential: the mystery of the Incarnation.

This fresco does not represent only an event of the past. It speaks to us about ourselves, today. Do we not also sometimes experience these little annunciations that make us suddenly cry out to the Lord, or thank him in silence because he has suddenly made himself present? Something within us then stops, for a tenth of a second at times, calling us back to our lived interiority. An intimate and secret movement of praise, supplication or gratitude.

As Madeleine-Sophie also says: “Accustom yourselves to carry Him everywhere through recollection in his Holy Presence, at least by an inclination of the heart that costs no effort! It is the sunflower that naturally follows the movement that draws it towards the star that lights and enlivens it.”⁹

What makes us feel so at ease beside Mater?

Why do we want to stay near her, to listen in silence as she does, or else to talk with her in all simplicity, as one speaks among friends?

I offer you **a hypothesis** that may be challenged but that I had great joy in discovering. A friend of mine, an artist and more of a scientist than I am, measured the fresco in all its dimensions to see whether, by chance, it might be built according to what is called the **golden number**, or the **Divine Proportion**. This ratio, discovered in antiquity and found everywhere in nature, was

⁴ “At a midday recreation, one Sunday, the community was talking about the beautiful month dedicated to Mary and solemnised with such pomp in Rome, when a portress came to impose a general sacrifice by informing the Reverend Mother de Coriolis that she was wanted in the parlour. A voice then cried out: ‘Ah, if the Blessed Virgin would deign to come herself and preside over our recreation!’ I was then a postulant, and the thought came to me at that moment that I could make use of a large empty niche that stood in the middle of our circle, opposite the place that our R.M. de Coriolis had just left, to make a Blessed Virgin in the temple of Jerusalem, a subject that I had composed from my childhood.” P. Perdrau, *Petite notice historique sur la chapelle de Mater Admirabilis à Rome* (Short historical note on the chapel of Mater Admirabilis in Rome), Pauline Perdrau, 6 May 1862

⁵ Ibid.

⁶ To Mother Emma de Bouchaud at Niort, Rome, 22 January 1851

⁷ To Mother Caroline Cauche at McSherrystown (Pennsylvania), Paris, 30 January 1843

⁸ Society of the Sacred Heart, *Constitutions of 1882*, no. 22

⁹ To Mother Gonzague Laure Junot at Jette – Novitiate, Paris, 30 January 1857

taken up by Leonardo da Vinci in his Vitruvian Man. It happens that it was very fashionable in the nineteenth century, and it is more than likely that Pauline Perdrau, an art student, knew and had studied it.

Now, her fresco of Mater respects the Divine Proportion in every respect **[Slide 19, proportions]**. Did she apply it deliberately, or did the excellent artist that she was find these proportions as if by intuition? We shall never be able to answer that question. If I choose to speak of it here, it is because it may explain why we feel so at ease before this fresco. Paul Valéry, who took a great interest in the golden number, says this: “This ratio is that of a balanced dynamism, which it makes us feel even in the static immortality of works of visual art.”

[slide 20, Fresco] Pauline’s fresco puts us in relationship with Mater, it allows us to meet her; something alive is happening that concerns Mater and concerns us.

We experience a mobile immobility.

“Mary’s immobility, a suspended immobility, gives a new meaning to the divine movement at work in her. It has meaning only because it is above all the expression of an interior experience. An interior experience that transforms the gaze – hers and ours – and carries it towards the Origin, towards the One, towards her God and our God.”¹⁰

The Virgin, who has let go of the thread of her work, makes herself available to God, but also to us. She listens to us, she listens to the Lord and to the annunciation that he is carrying out in us through her, who steps aside to let **Him** come to be in us. Might the thread of the distaff and the spindle at rest **[slide 21]** not be an invitation to let go of the threads of whatever distracts us and leaves us on the surface of ourselves, in order to move towards other, far more essential threads: those of authentic encounter, of friendship, of fraternal accompaniment, of constructive conversations, of shared research, of shared silences...

[slide 22, fresco] If we consider the general composition of the fresco, in particular the distribution of straight lines and curves, we see Mary lodged in a niche that is not only rounded at its top but also rounded in a hollow, a curved space that draws the gaze towards the back, towards the depths. Everything in Mary is roundness, feminine roundness, roundness accentuated by the lines of the floor and the two columns of the temple, which are perfectly straight. The floor is made of squares, each divided into four triangles. Might this be a discreet allusion to the mystery taking place: God the Trinity (the triangles) coming to be incarnate in our humanity (the squares)? **[slide 23 parquet floor]**

[slide 24 fresco] Likewise, incidentally, there are seven flowers on the lily, that is to say four plus three. The living relationship that the fresco establishes between the Virgin Mary and ourselves is rooted in, and finds its meaning in, **the Source-Relationship, the relationship of relationships, that of the Father and the Son in their common Spirit.**

An interior experience that Madeleine-Sophie, throughout her letters and conferences, never ceases to recommend to her sisters: **“Become truly interior.”** She often quotes our Constitutions: “The spirit of the Society is essentially based upon prayer and the **interior life,**

¹⁰ Expression received from Françoise Heyer, who enabled me to discover the Divine Proportion of the fresco. Author of *Le Notre Père est un trésor* (Salvator, 2022) and of *Jean-Sébastien Bach. Les variations Goldberg – Une montagne à graver* (L’Harmattan, 2019).

since we cannot glorify the adorable Heart of Jesus worthily except inasmuch as we apply ourselves to study His interior dispositions in order to unite and conform ourselves to them.”¹¹

In Mater we find something that is sometimes difficult for us to truly distinguish in our lives, with a **dimension that is both contemplative and apostolic**.

Madeleine-Sophie used to say: “Be Marthas melted into Marys.” Of course she was referring to another Mary, the sister of Martha and Lazarus. This well-known gospel scene, of Jesus’ visit to his two friends, perfectly expresses our vocation: to be symbolically always seated interiorly at the Lord’s feet to listen to him, as Mater is, and this in the midst of the greatest occupations.

There is a letting go on the part of the Virgin Mary **[slide 25 hands]**, a pause in the action of weaving, which Madeleine-Sophie expresses in these words to a religious with many responsibilities: “Aim at an interior life through the habit of silence and recollection... do not let yourself be drawn into too much work and too many relationships; keep a solitude in the depths of your soul, although you are busy outwardly.”¹²

I would now like to draw your attention to another symbol.

[Slide 26] Mater is clothed in a dress whose **rosewood colour** carries great symbolic force. It is not, indeed, a candy pink such as young girls sometimes wear. It is a deeper, more complex pink in its composition. To make it, darker colours, and sometimes even ash, are added to red and white. Rosewood is known for its spiritual meaning, associated with “rootedness, protection, spiritual growth and harmony.”¹³ The sober elegance of Mater’s dress is enhanced by the position of her body, seated on a chair of green velvet edged with gilded studs.

Mater is as if “wrapped in the mantle of light.”¹⁴ Her head, slightly inclined and covered with a light veil, lets us glimpse beautiful curls of blond hair **[slide 27]**. Pauline painted a beautiful young woman, **[slide 28 fresco]** with marked feminine forms (her hips, her bodice, the overall position of her body). A young woman with a modest posture, humbly turned towards her interior life, towards what is happening in her heart. No ostentation, no aestheticism, but fine work by Pauline that lets us sense Mary’s being there, the offering of her whole self, whose rosewood dress announces very discreetly yet forcefully what it will cost her to surrender herself to the action of the Holy Spirit.

This colour can, indeed, evoke that of the chasubles worn by the priest during two essential liturgical seasons: the Sundays of *Laetare* and *Gaudete*.

Did Pauline think that the fourth Sunday of Lent, *Laetare* Sunday, took its name from the opening antiphon: “Rejoice with Jerusalem...”¹⁵? Mater, seated in the temple of Jerusalem open to the world, carries within her the one who will give his life on the cross for the salvation of each one of us and of the world. Mary, to whom the old man Simeon foretold that a sword would pierce her heart. Mary standing at the foot of the Cross. Mary who, here, has suspended the spinning of the thread destined for the curtain of the Temple, that curtain which will be torn at the death of Jesus.

¹¹ *Constitutions 1815*, abridged plan 5 and *Constitutions 1982*, no. 17

¹² To Mother Alexandrine Brangier in America (undated)

¹³ <https://sjamaan.nl/fr/le-sens-spirituel-du-palissandre>

¹⁴ Psalm 104 (103), 2

¹⁵ Isaiah 66:10-11

A mingling of joy and sorrow in this deep pink that we also find worn by the celebrant at Mass on the third Sunday of Advent, *Gaudete* Sunday: “Rejoice in the Lord always. I shall say it again: rejoice, the Lord is near!”¹⁶ as the antiphon of that Sunday of Advent sings. We are therefore at the moment of the Annunciation, in the truth and depth of this theological moment of the Incarnation, which can only be understood in the light of the death and resurrection of Jesus. The joy here is silent, discreet; it includes suffering.

The fresco expresses **the weight of a life given in full awareness**, in full maturity and in full assent to the sufferings to come. We are not dealing with an adolescent ignorant of real life. We are in the presence of a woman whose heart is wholly attuned to that of her God, wholly obedient, that is, listening to the Spirit (as the etymology of the verb *ob-audire* signifies: to listen from beneath, from within what is happening).

This dress of Mary that falls to the floor, as well as her cape that goes straight down, [slide 29] marks **the gravity of this moment in both senses of the term**. On the one hand, the gravity that draws towards the centre of the earth and gives Mary strength and weight, making her able to welcome the event that is taking place in her. On the other hand, gravity in the sense of the seriousness of this moment, which is a *kairos*, a decisive moment in the history of Salvation.

In *Mater Admirabilis* [slide 30] a *Mater Dolorosa* is therefore secretly lodged.

From the very beginning Madeleine-Sophie had entrusted the Society to Our Lady of Sorrows, to whom she had a deep devotion. She found one painted on a wall in the garden of the Villa Lante when she acquired that property. She saw in it a sign from God and wished to have it reproduced on a canvas that can be seen today on the grand staircase of the Villa Lante. [slide 31 ***Mater Dolorosa* Villa Lante**].

[slide 32 fresco] *Mater Admirabilis* therefore bears her name very well. For nearly two years, following Pauline Perdrau, she was called “*La Madonna del Giglio*”, the Madonna of the Lily. Yet the young woman we are contemplating is **fully a mother**; she accepts in faith the present of what is happening to her and the still unknown future of what will befall her child. She is already becoming the educator of Jesus.

Another detail caught my attention

I think that the original fresco did not include the twelve stars stuck around the Virgin’s face. Pauline had simply painted the very plain halo that we see here [slide 33 face]. If I am not mistaken, however, she painted **one star, a single one**, very high above Mary, which one might think of as **the Shepherd’s star**: the first to rise and the last to set, the star that guides and shows the way in the night. [slide 34 the star]

Mary carries within her the One who will be the Shepherd, the Pastor of the flock, who knows his sheep and calls them by name. In this star I see a discreet invitation to remember, we religious of the Sacred Heart, our vow to educate the young. Just as Mary will be the educator of the child Jesus, so we must be educators in the image of Mary.

[slide 35 fresco] To learn ourselves first, and also to teach the young, to **symbolically put down our spindle in order to listen and to discern life, true life**, so different from the idols that deprive us of it. Does the good Shepherd not say: “I came so that they might have life, and

¹⁶ Philippians 4:4-5

have it more abundantly”?¹⁷ Does the thread of the spindle connected to the distaff not also speak to us of our mobile phones, wireless indeed, but which connect us to the best or to the worst?

To educate in discernment means to educate in interiority. **[slide 36]** To know how to stop, to let go of what hinders our freedom to think and to live, to listen deeply, to learn not to fear silence and this mobile immobility in which Someone tirelessly seeks to reveal Himself in our deepest being and, in revealing Himself, reveals us to ourselves as creatures and children of God.

There is the spindle, at once held and let go by the Virgin, and there is also the book. [slide 37]

And what if this book were the prototype of all books? Books indispensable to our formation and to that of the young? The Bible of course, but also all the others, scientific and literary.

Madeleine-Sophie recommended literature for the older pupils; she had them read contemporary novels. She said: “Make them read the great facts of history and they will put their little troubles into perspective.” We therefore had to be “like mothers” to our pupils, with all the roundness and flexibility that this implies, while giving them strong and demanding spiritual and intellectual nourishment.

[Slide 38 fresco] Madeleine-Sophie would have adopted without hesitation the expression “integral education”: one had to know how to sew and embroider (as the work basket of the superior of the community, painted by Pauline, suggests), but also how to calculate the effects of perspective and to know the great classical and contemporary authors.

To conclude, I would say that Pauline has left us **a true work of art** that one never tires of contemplating and which, beyond its seemingly sentimental and outdated appearance, tells us so many things for our lives today and with which one never ceases to dialogue.

I take as my own **the conclusion of Pope Francis in his letter on the role of literature in formation:**

Mater Admirabilis is a work that “sets language in motion, frees and purifies it: it finally opens it to other possibilities of expression and exploration, it makes it welcoming to the **Word** that takes up residence in human language, not when language understands itself as a knowledge already full, definitive and complete, but when it becomes a vigil of listening, awaiting the One who comes to *make all things new* (cf. Rev 21:5).”

And the Pope quotes the poet Paul Celan: “Those who truly learn to see, draw close to what is unseen.”¹⁸

¹⁷ John 10:10

¹⁸ Letter of Pope Francis, “On the Role of Literature in Formation”, no. 42

<https://www.vatican.va/content/francesco/en/letters/2024/documents/20240717-lettera-ruolo-letteratura-formazione.html>