

Mary, Mother of the Lord, Mother of Love

At the announcement that she would give birth to "the Son of the Most High" without knowing man, by the power of the Holy Spirit, Mary responded with the obedience of faith, certain that "with God nothing will be impossible": "Behold, I am the handmaid of the Lord; let it be [done] to me according to your word." Thus, giving her consent to God's word, Mary becomes the mother of Jesus. Espousing the divine will for salvation wholeheartedly, without a single sin to restrain her, she gave herself entirely to the person and to the work of her Son; she did so in order to serve the mystery of redemption with him and dependent on him, by God's grace.

We do not worship Mary but we honor her in prayer and in praying the Hail Mary for her crucial role in making our salvation possible. Being obedient to God Mary became the cause of salvation for herself and for the whole human race. The knot of Eve's disobedience was untied by Mary's obedience: what Eve bound through her disbelief, Mary loosened by her faith.

As St. Paul once noted, Jesus is the "one mediator of God and men" (1 Tim 2:5). Still, we can, and should, turn to Mary in prayer, for the graces she gives us come from God. St. Louis De Montfort once referred to the Blessed Mother (as she is also known) as the "treasurer and dispenser of God's graces." Therefore, it doesn't hurt for us to get to know her better through prayer!

Praying the Hail Mary or showing our devotion to her doesn't mean we are putting her ahead of Jesus, as some might fear. When we pray to Mary we are also praying through Mary, asking her to intercede with God for us on our behalf.

There are very few records of Mary's explicit words in the texts of the New Testament of the Bible. However, there is no lack of her presence at the most significant events in the life, ministry, death and resurrection of Jesus Christ and therefore in the great events of salvation history. She always encountered God - in profound ways - from the beginning to the end of her life. She lived in His presence. She still does. In every encounter, she surrendered to love and was changed. She was a woman prepared by God and continually surrendered to His love. This is the meaning of Mary. She is our model as well as our mother.

Mary was there at the Incarnation, Birth, Crucifixion, and Resurrection of our Lord Jesus Christ. She was there throughout what are often called the "hidden years" in His life at Nazareth where ordinary work was ennobled and child-rearing forever changed because of His participation. His disciples spent three years with Him, during His "public ministry", but Mary spent thirty three years!

Mary was the perfect choice to be the Mother of God in that, although she was human just like the rest of us, she was nonetheless conceived without the stain of original sin (the dogma of the Immaculate Conception). (She had that in common only with her Son!) She was, without any sin and gifted with every virtue.

We should remember and reflect on the truth that in the earthly life of the Redeemer, every word He uttered - at every age and stage - and every act He undertook was redemptive, revealing as it does the very life of God and the mystery of heaven touching earth. Because of that, every moment of His presence among us reveals the deeper purpose of our own lives when they are lived entirely for Him.

Mary was there in all those pregnant moments of His complete thirty-three year earthly mission of love. His redemptive presence forever changed the history of the world and can do so in our own personal histories if we learn how to surrender to His invitation to love and choose to live as Mary did. The mission of the Redeemer continues now for all who have the eyes to see His presence still walking and working among us; and the ears to hear His loving words still being spoken amidst the business and craziness of our daily lives as Mary did.

His presence forever changed the world that we are all living in. We are welcomed into a new relationship with Him and therefore with this world that He still loves, if we invite His redemptive presence into our lives, cooperate with grace in order to change ourselves and allow ourselves to be prepared for His coming. Every waking moment can now be filled with the invitation of grace, if we learn to discover their deeper meaning and make them our own. If we learn to live our entire life as, an invitation to love, an encounter with the God of love, as Mary did, we will find our lives transformed by the Son whom she bore for the whole world.

Mary was always willing to be of service. She went to visit and help her cousin Elizabeth, who was then pregnant with John the Baptist. We can admire Mary's devotion (as well as her stamina!) in setting out on what must have been a difficult journey to go from Nazareth, where she lived, to a town in Judah where her cousin lived, about 70 miles away. Remember, this was in an era when she couldn't just hop in a car or a bus to get there!

She was the first evangelizer and the first disciple of her own Son Jesus. She gave the first Gospel testimony to her cousin, Elizabeth, without words, as the Redeemer in her womb drew the child in her womb, John the Baptizer to Himself. He did so from the Throne he had established in Mary's womb. Jesus, Love Incarnate, drew John from the very first home of the whole human race, a mother's womb. At the beginning of that missionary encounter, Elizabeth greeted Mary with profound humility, saying "who am I that the mother of my Lord should come to me?" Then the son in Elizabeth's womb leapt in praise of the Maker of the Universe, taken residence in Mary's womb.

John the Baptizer, the last Prophet of Old Testament and first of the New, was prepared in a womb - and drawn by this amazing grace - without a word being spoken, through Mary's witness of surrendered love. This event, traditionally called "The Visitation," recorded in the Gospel of St. Luke (Luke 1: 39-45), is meant to continue in our lives as we carry Jesus forward in time. It can through the witness of our surrendered lives ...of love.

In the Biblical account, this encounter immediately follows the visit of the Angel Gabriel to Mary (Luke 16:38) and is a fruit of her humble obedient response to the word of God which she was most certainly attuned to hearing. That response was not a one-time reaction. It was the fruit borne from a life of surrendered love and it stretched forward to characterize and inform her entire life.

Mary was there at the Wedding Feast at Cana in Galilee, when the first of the Lord's "signs" occurred - in a response to and as a fruit of - her intercession. It was there she gave that sage and still relevant advice to all those in attendance at that wedding and to all who throughout human history seek to follow her Son, "Do whatever He tells you". She still invites that kind of response through the testimony of her simple, surrendered life which continues to witness throughout human history to all men and women who choose to follow her Son, the Redeemer of the world.

She was there on the great day of Pentecost, the birthday of the Church, and witnessed the extraordinary clothing with the Holy Spirit that transformed and empowered the early disciples. That same Holy Spirit had inspired her own unique missionary vocation. Mary understood this work of the Holy Spirit unlike anyone in history. She had been clothed in that wonderful gift when she was first visited by the angel and "overshadowed." It empowered her to live her whole life in complete surrender to God's will and to thereby prefigure the mission of the entire Christian community throughout history.

Mary understood all of this because she was a woman in love -with God. Mary was a woman of prayer, an ongoing conversation and intimate communion with God. We are invited into her prayer because we are invited into that same relationship with God. Understanding and living the Prayer of Mary is about living a life of surrendered love. It is about being- more than about doing. It is about response- more than initiation. It is about encountering God relationally, personally and intimately. It is about a receiving, giving, receiving, giving...and therefore becoming a person for the Lord and in Him for others. It is about offering the "Fiat" of a surrendered life. Mary's "Fiat" ("let it be done"), freely given in response to the visitation from the messenger of heaven, the angel, provides a pattern of prayer and a way to live for every follower of her Son.

In the biblical account her Fiat issues forth into the very real fruit of her praise, her "Magnificat." This song is recorded in the sacred text of the New Testament of the Bible and begins with the words "My soul doth magnify the Lord." This hymn of praise has been memorialized in that ancient, beautiful, biblically based prayer that the Christian tradition refers to as "The Magnificat" (Luke 1:46-55). This prayer contains the very essence of the Christian faith, the Christian life, and for those with eyes to see, ears to hear and hearts to understand, reveals the very meaning of human existence. We were made to give ourselves away in love because we were made for God.

The "Fiat" is more than a prayer and the "Magnificat" more than a hymn of praise. Together they constitute a lesson book, a guide, and a road for this journey that we are all called to walk. Our daily life, so very real and human, with all of its blessings and all of its pain, can be packed with meaning, purpose and destiny; if we have the eyes to see, ears to hear and hearts' to respond with the kind of voluntary surrender that was so beautifully expressed by Mary, the Virgin of Nazareth. That response to the gift of God reveals the heart of true faith.

This lesson book is desperately needed by Christians, indeed all people of good will, in this age so characterized by pride, arrogance of power and grandiosity. The pattern of that prayer and the melody of that song reveal the pattern of Mary's entire life and the score of what our own is meant to become. It follows along a path of surrendered love. It begins with God's gift and invitation, proceeds to a response, leads to praise and is intended to bear the fruit of a meaningful life, pregnant with the promise of redemption.

It is this pattern that we must make our own if we are to comprehend and live its relevance in our own lives. When we learn to walk in "Mary's way", which is the way of her Son and Savior, we will find the meaning of life itself because we choose through love to give our lives away in love, to the One who is Love. Mary said "Yes" to the invitation to love and she humbled herself. She confronted her own fears and she entered into a new way of living. All of this was in continued response to an original invitation of love, a gift, initiated by a loving God.

Her simple response of "yes" overflowed into her "Magnificat" of praise. Through this response, she assumed a life's posture of receiving and giving, she became a fruitful woman, a "God-bearer" or "Mother of God". She brought forth the Word of God and "the Word became flesh and dwelt among us". Her "Yes", her humble surrender, bore the fruit of her "Magnificat" which bore the fruit of the Word, which was spoken and birthed through her - - a trail of love. It provides a prototype of the vocation of every human person who says "Yes" to God and learns to bear the fruit of surrendered love. Mary's "Yes" touches the inner core of the meaning of life for all men and women who are children of the one Creator. We were made to give ourselves away to the Lord and to others.

God is not an "add on" to our life. Rather, He is its source and its summit. Authentic and fruitful spirituality is "inside out" rather than "outside in." There is a way, a pattern that all men and women are invited into - not just once, but daily. This is the way of surrendered love. Mary's surrender reveals the deeper meaning of every human life and is the true path to authentic peace. It is the portal of the mystery of meaning itself. It is what Christian Scripture calls the "more excellent way" (1 Cor. 12), the way of love.

Mary understood and walked this way with extraordinary humility. Is it any wonder that the early Christians painted her image in the catacombs during their moments of fear, persecution and doubt? They found great inspiration from this little woman of great faith. In her yes they came to understand that ordinary people can change human history. They were inspired to add their own yes, their own fiat to hers. Is it any wonder that the writings of the early fathers of the Christian Church are also replete with reflections on this woman who said so little verbally in the biblical text? That is because it is not about an abundance of our words but rather our receptivity to the Word.

Because of Mary's obedient "yes" to the angel, the undoing of the "no-I will not serve" uttered in rebellion by the first woman Eve, early Christian apologists called Mary "The Second Eve", the mother of a new creation, because she said "Yes" and in her womb carried the One whom the biblical authors would call the "New Adam." Jesus Christ was born from her as the first born of a new race of men and women who would themselves come to find a new birth through His life, death and Resurrection through saying "Yes" to him in both word and deed.

That same Redeemer now comes to reside within, and live through, all of those who respond to the invitation of Love like Mary did. It comes to all who are prepared and who surrender. Mary's choice, her response to the invitation of a God who always respects human freedom, is a singularly extraordinary event in all of human history. However, it is meant to be much more. It is meant to be an invitation to each one of us to explore our own personal histories and to write them anew in Him.