

THE DAWN OF SALVATION HISTORY — MARY, THE MOTHER OF FAITH



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On March 25, 1987, the feast of the Annunciation, Pope John Paul II marked the opening of the Marian Year with his encyclical The Mother of the Redeemer. In his introduction, he refers to Mary under her title "the Morning Star" (Stella Matutina), reaffirming her appearance in history not as a haphazard event, but in direct accord with God's salvific plan. This morning star broke upon a world darkened by man's sin, and like the sudden brightness of a new dawn heralded the coming of the "Sun of Justice," Christ the Lord. This light not only shines upon a people groping in darkness, but changes hearts hardened by sin or eroded by indifference into hearts of warmth and concern for others, resolute in confronting the pains and travails of a suffering humanity.

In section three of the Pope's encyclical when speaking of the meaning of the Marian Year for Christians, he draws attention to the need for promoting a Marian spirituality. This spirituality gives particular emphasis to the faith-life of the Mother of God. Actually, Marian spirituality is not something new in the Church. It has a long and rich history dating back to the early Fathers, and, throughout the centuries, numerous saints have been involved in its promotion, most notably St. Bernard and St. John Bosco. The encyclical makes special mention of the Marian spirituality of Louis-Marie Grignon de Montfort, who lived during the closing years of the 19th century. De Montfort's Marian spirituality is aptly summed up in his own words: "offering of self to Jesus through the hands of Mary." His well-known work True

Devotion to the Blessed Virgin Mary, can be seen as part of a renewal in traditional Marian spirituality and a revitalized awareness of the role Mary continues to play in the spiritual life of the Church today.

It is not my intention here to go into the full scope of Marian spirituality in the life of the Church, but rather to focus on the one aspect which is of the essence of her spirituality - her faith-life - and to do this from the standpoint of salvation history.

“How Can This Be?”

While the historical reliability of the Annunciation and the Infancy Narratives as found in the gospel accounts of Matthew and Luke have in recent years been brought into question by various scripture scholars, there is complete agreement on the fact that Jesus of Nazareth was born of a Jewish maiden whose name was Mary. Were one to view Mary solely through the eyes of scientific historicity, the conclusions arrived at would always include these facts: Mary was a young Jewish girl, who was married to a just man named Joseph, through arrangements made by her parents with a local matchmaker. Their child was a son, whom they named Jesus. However, it is only through faith that one can enter into a fuller comprehension of the mystery surrounding the bare facts, and only by means of faith can one approach the mystery of Mary's heart. In his book The Encounter of Silence, the noted theologian Karl Rahner writes of the interior heart of every person as a "holy of holies," and only God, the great Highpriest can enter into it fully and completely. Faith speaks to faith, and only through the "eyes of faith" can the beauty of Mary's heart be seen and made known. To enter into Mary's "holy of holies" is to enter with God and be guided by his divine light.

It is obvious to the reader that the arrangement of the materials pertaining to Jesus' birth is different in Luke's gospel when compared to Matthew's narration. Luke gives us parallel accounts of the annunciation and birth of both John the Baptist and Jesus, deliberately placing them in contrast with each other. He uses their similarities to underline sharp distinctions in each one's identity and mission. In his annunciation narratives, when both Zechariah and Mary are brought face-to-face with the mystery of God, Luke records the radical differences in each's response. In doing this, he demonstrates clearly how Mary's faith-response opens up the final chapter in salvation history.

Placing to one side arguments for and against the historicity of the angel's words to Mary at the Annunciation as they appear in Luke's gospel, there can be no doubt that these words of greeting do contain

very specific meanings (Luke 1: 28-33), and, in fact, are an accurate summary of the faith of the early Christian community: "Hail, full of grace," "The Lord is with you," "Blessed are you among women...for you will bring forth the Son of God." While the angel's words may not assume great importance in the Christological development of the doctrine of Jesus as Son of God, the response of Mary does become the centre of attention from the perspective of Mariology. Luke records that when Mary was presented with God's call through the words of the angel to become the mother of God's Son, though still a virgin, her reaction was expressed in two seemingly contradictory responses: "How can this be?" and "Be it done unto me according to Your word!"

If we take Mary's initial response "How can this be?" out of context, we shall never be able to arrive at a picture of Mary's inmost thoughts. If faith in God is not to be considered a form of "cheap grace," then these two phrases must be taken together as a true reflection of the struggle that took place in Mary's heart as a result of the appearance of the angel. "How can this be?" mirrors her confusion and distress when confronted with the deep and incomprehensible mystery of God. She was being asked to acquiesce to something outside the bounds of ordinary reality. How could a virgin become a mother; give birth to a child of flesh and blood? Virginity and motherhood are in total opposition to each other. Was it indeed possible for a virgin to conceive and bear a child? Faced with this apparent contradiction, Mary's heart was thrown into a dark abyss. "How can this be?" is a response that indicates how far beyond the ability of man to reason or imagine lies the salvific work of God. Before this awesome mystery, Mary is humbled and frightened. At last, however, her simple prayer rises to break the surface of this darkness: "Be it done to me according to your word." This is a prayer of faith. She did not know what was to happen nor understand the mystery of it all, but with her whole heart she accepted it and put her faith in the power of God's word. Mary's faith did not create a miracle; at the very least, her faith made it possible for God to work his miracle within her.

Faith is indeed a marvelous force. It not only opens the heart of the believer, but also the heart of the one on whom faith has been bestowed. It gives to both the power to accomplish much. Our own human experience helps us to appreciate how faith in someone is able to release hidden strengths and talents in that person. Conversely, when a person is distrusted, it only serves to suppress the expression of his true capabilities and retard his development into a complete person. If faith is the food of love, then a love which is not fed by faith is destined to shrivel away and die. If faith is the key that opens the door of love, then Mary's prayer of faith opened wide the gateway to

salvation...the realization of God's plan of love for all mankind. Here we can come to appreciate more clearly the theological understanding of the relationship of faith and unbelief which is given such prominence in John's gospel: faith leads to life; unbelief leads to death.

The angel's words to Mary were like a stone tossed into a placid lake. The surface is disturbed; ripples form which are difficult to pacify. Finally, calm is restored by her own faith and trust. At the same time, she is keenly aware that something new has entered abruptly into the lake of her own soul - God's Word, which changes her whole existence. This new existence of Mary did not come about without personal pain and effort. It was caused by God and was the fruit of her faith-response to His invitation.

"She Kept All These Things in Her Heart."

We speak of faith as a virtue in so far as this gratuitous gift of God demands the cooperation of man. In Luke's narration of the boy Jesus preaching to the elders in the Temple, we find another manifestation of the depth of Mary's faith-life.

Although faith is "a light", this light often lies hidden in the world. St. Paul has reminded us that in this world we see things only dimly as in a darkened mirror. All things material are signs that give off both positive and negative meanings. The very body that identifies me to others as a person, at one and the same time conceals from others who I really am. I use this body to communicate; it forms words and actions, expresses attitudes and emotions whereby I interrelate with others and am known to them. However, these signs of who I am are limited by their mode of expression, and represent me only in part. In fact they often conceal rather than reveal my person. The signs meant to reveal me to others are only images seen in the reflection of a darkened mirror. What is required then is a constant and mutual faith that reaches beyond the projected images and into the mystery of the person beneath the images.

Mary's relationship to the boy Jesus was another testing-ground for her faith. To see beyond his physical growth and mental development into the reality of her son as the incarnate wisdom of God was no easy matter. The wisdom of the Son of God must be expressed in the words and actions of a frail and limited physical being, and yet this material body, with all its power to reveal mystery, places limits on a limitless wisdom and conceals much more than it reveals. Is it any wonder then that Luke describes Mary and Joseph's response to Jesus in the temple with the words: "They did not understand" (Luke 2:51)? How did Mary

overcome this obstacle to understanding? Certainly not through demanding of her son further explanations, for Luke notes that whenever Mary is confronted with this mystery: "She kept all these things in her heart," where she meditated on them over and over again. God's Word which she once conceived in her womb was forever nourished in her heart.

Word and Faith

It would seem that word and faith are inseparable. In our human encounters we often find a person's words more readily understandable objects of our faith than a person's actions, which are often obscure and open to different interpretations. It is the spoken word that offers the more complete sign of the meaning of human activity, rather than the action taken by itself. Actions are in need of verbal explanation. Jesus' public ministry was a ministry of both word and action. He healed the sick and taught his disciples through verbal preaching. Without his words, the meaning of much of his activity would have been lost. It is difficult for us to accept that God's own words are expressed in and through the words of men. But what is more difficult to accept is that God's promises are transmitted through the promises of men. During his three-year public ministry, Jesus promised the "coming of the kingdom of God." According to Luke this was to be a completely new entity. At its appearance, the blind would see, the hungry would be filled, those in bondage would be set free, and humanity would experience true equality and universal love (Luke 4:18-19). This promise came from the human lips of an itinerant preacher. Is it any wonder that those who heard it responded in scorn: "Is this not Joseph's son?"

Man is not a very good promiser. His promises are subject to human limitations and often go unfulfilled. The philosopher Heidegger has said of man that he is "a forgetful animal." Not only are his promises easily forgotten, but most of the time he gives little thought to the goal and purpose of his existence - this too is part of his forgetful nature. It requires faith to accept the promises of God when they are mediated through the weak and limited words of man. And it requires a great deal of faith to believe that what God has promised in this way, he will indeed accomplish, especially when we consider that the bearers of such promises are frail and weak human beings like ourselves.

With unswerving faith Mary, who accompanied Jesus throughout his life, believed in all her son's words and actions. Mary's faith led her through the darkened images of man's words to accept God's word with her whole heart. Mary is blessed because she "heard the word of God and kept it" (Luke 11:28).

Faith Which Conquers Suffering and Death

The high point of Mary's faith-life is expressed in one sentence of John's Gospel: "Standing by the cross of Jesus was his mother" (John 19:25). John chose the word "standing" for a particular reason. "Standing up" is in contrast with "falling away". Faced with great pain and sorrow, the faith of many is severely tested. Even Jesus' closest disciples could not pass this test. Peter, forgetting the promises he had made, denied the Lord and fell away. Mary's steadfast persistence in the midst of overwhelming suffering shows how faith can give to man great strength and power to accept and bear with suffering. In Mary's acceptance we see a heart very close to that heart of Jesus, which was pierced by the lance and from which blood and water flowed. For John, the blood and water that flowed from Christ's side are the sign and symbol of the birth of his church.

Pain and sorrow easily cause people to become closed off and isolated. Deep personal wounds weaken love, and frequently cause the heart to become cold. The closed and hardened heart is indeed without life. Confronted with suffering and death, the heart grows numb, because, of itself, human nature can find no source of strength to lift it above this evil. Mary was not like this. The lance of suffering which pierced the heart of her Son, at the same time was thrust through her own. Yet Mary's heart did not close in on itself, but opened even wider to the world. She welcomed humankind into the deep wounds of her heart, and with her tears, comforted a humanity whose sin was the very cause of those wounds.

In the midst of one's own sorrows, to be able to open one's heart to others, accept and give warmth and compassion in return, this is another of faith's strengths. This strength does not come from our own human nature, but rather it is a gift of God. This "strength to be wounded" allows us not only not to accept death, but also gives us a power to overcome death's seeming victory. "Mary standing at the foot of the cross" reveals to sinful men and women an eternal truth: love conquers death. If suffering is unavoidable in life, then in the face of suffering, we are given only two alternatives: to close ourselves off from others and retreat into solitude, or courageously open ourselves, accept our sufferings and continue to give of ourselves in compassion to others. The former leads to isolation and death; the latter leads to new life. The reason Mary is called "the Mother of Sorrows" is not because her sufferings were many, but because she chose the latter course: in the midst of her pain, she was accepting and giving, thus transforming the coldness of death into the warmth of new life.