

A Meditation: The Stages of Apostolic Formation in the Life of Mary

*by Cardinal Carlo Maria Martini, S.J.
Translated from the Italian by Patricia Mary Flanagan,
S.N.D. and Betty Ann Maheu, M.M.*

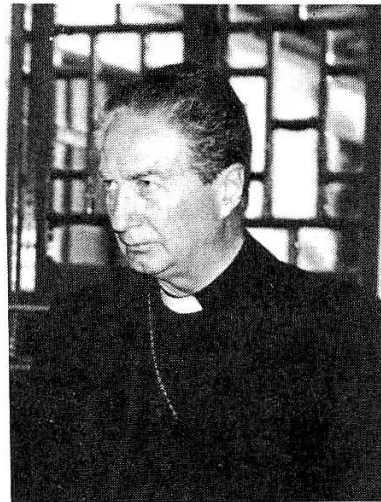
(The following article is taken from a tape recording of a meditation given in Rome to the Major Superiors of Women at a International Union of Superiors General (UISG). It is reprinted with permission.)

Introduction

In this meditation I will consider the stages in the apostolic formation of Mary, the Mother of the Lord, from the time she was first disturbed by the message of the angel to her peaceful and reassuring presence in the primitive church.

The texts for our reflection are the following:

- Lumen gentium*, 58;
- Luke 1, 29 - Mary is disturbed at the message of the angel;
- Luke 1, 42-46 - Mary is praised by Elizabeth and glorifies the Lord;
- Luke 2, 50 - Mary and Joseph do not understand the words of Jesus;
- Luke 8, 19 - Mary is ignored by Jesus;
- Luke 23, 49 - The women at the foot of the cross;
- John 19, 26-27 - Mary at the foot of the cross;
- Acts 1, 14 -The primitive community gathered with Mary, the Mother of Jesus.



O Lord, you who led Mary, your Mother, in the way of formation, in the way of detachment that she might learn to be a handmaid, grant that we who, in faith, turn to her, the Mother of the Church, may also be formed in a true apostolic spirituality. With Mary, we ask you this, you who reign gloriously with the Father and the Holy Spirit now and forever. Amen

At first it may come as a surprise that there are stages in Mary's formation, that she did, in fact, even have an on-going formation; but this is what the Vatican Council tells us in *Lumen Gentium*, 58. Concluding the account of what Mary did during the infancy of Jesus and the beginning of his public life, it says, "Thus the Blessed Virgin advanced in her pilgrimage of faith."

She was, therefore, on a pilgrimage of faith. For a few moments, let us pursue this pilgrimage, this journey, if only in a schematic way.

The Formation of Mary

I shall distinguish five stages in the formation of Mary. The first, *the preparatory stage*, is described most clearly in the annunciation passage in the first chapter of Luke. In this passage we will look at one point only. "Mary," says the Greek text. "was disturbed (*διεταράχθη*) within herself," was deeply disturbed interiorly . The Greek word is very strong. It is the same word used to describe the fear that came to Herod when he learned that the Messiah had been born, (Mt. 2,3). "Herod was deeply troubled (*διεταράχθη*)." The word signifies that something important, unexpected, unforeseen will happen. This same word is also used by Luke when Zachariah is confronted by the message of the angel (Lk 1,12). The text says that, at the vision of the angel at the right of the altar of incense, "Zachariah was overcome with fear (*διεταράχθη*)." This particular verb describes the spiritual insight which comes to us in the presence of God when we suddenly realize that he is about to turn all our plans upside down and shatter all our ordinary frames of reference--the frames of reference to which we have become all too well accustomed. Now, he is about to thrust us into new realms of the spirit. At this moment Mary experienced a rupture, a break with the past, even though her past was good and holy.

This was a qualitative leap, an entrance into a new state of life, one which she need no longer seek by faithfully reading the Scriptures but one to which the very Word of God has brought her. Therefore, this is a new beginning, and in a certain way it is equivalent to a conversion, a change in her horizon and frames of reference, a new road on which Mary now sets out in faith and in love.

After this preparatory period there follows the second stage of *initial enthusiasm*. When Mary accepted this new vision of life for herself, making herself totally obedient and fully a handmaid, she experienced an indescribable outburst of joy, a joy which diffused itself and which is most noticeable in her encounter with Elizabeth (Lk 1, 42-46). Mary receives lavish praise, "Blessed are you among women; blessed are you who believed." And Mary returns the praise, "My soul magnifies the Lord, my spirit exults..." We can compare this state of soul with that of a person who, having accepted the burden of religious life and made the initial sacrifices, finds herself full of enthusiasm, energy, and joy because a new and wider horizon is open before her, one wherein she becomes truly alive in the presence of God.

...describes the spiritual insight which comes to us in the presence of God when we suddenly realize that God is about to turn all our plans upside down and shatter all our ordinary frames of reference--the frames of reference to which we have become all too well accustomed.

But there comes a third stage, one which we can call *the dark years, the difficult years*. What happens to Mary at this stage? We cannot really understand this in depth and even less can we presume to describe it in a few words, but it seems to me that what happens to Mary is *an ever growing detachment from her son*. Mary, like every mother, instinctively wants to have her son for herself in some way, to understand him profoundly, to possess him, to be one with him. She now realizes that his detachment from her is such that she no longer understands him. It is the "hard saying" of Luke, 2,50. "His parents did not understand the words of Jesus"--the words: "Why did you seek me?" This sentence,

"They did not understand the words..." is the same phrase that Luke uses when he speaks of the apostles' lack of comprehension when confronted with the mystery of the cross. "The apostles did not understand anything of the words he spoke to them" (Lk 18,34), just as Mary and Joseph do not understand. Mary must accept this sorrow, take it to her heart in a spirit of faith and gradual detachment.

In the public life of Jesus this detachment is clear, almost stressed. In Luke 8,19, Mary and his brethren want to see him. They aren't able to because of the crowd and Jesus does not bother to respond. Instead he says, "My mother and my brethren are they who do the will of God." It is clear that Mary is included in this word in that she listens to the word of God and accomplishes it. However, outwardly, Jesus doesn't pay any attention to her whatsoever!

During these dark years Mary has to accept passivity. It is Jesus who saves, not she! Detachment! It is Jesus who must emerge and she must fade into the background. She understands fully the meaning of the words she spoke, "Behold the handmaid of the Lord." To be a handmaid is to be in second place. Let Jesus do whatever he wishes, as he wishes. Don't prescribe anything for him. No longer can she be near him as any mother would wish, to care for his health, to see that he eats, sleeps, that his enemies don't do him any harm. No, she must remain in the background, let him be. She must withdraw to contemplate the work of God which is *the Work* of God and accept it as such. This is the formation of Mary as Luke conceives it.

We gather this best, it seems to me, from the passage of Luke 23,49, when this distancing, this detachment, that Mary had to develop towards her son becomes, in fact, *a separation, the terrible separation of death*. This is accentuated in this passage because Luke does not even mention the name of Mary as John does. He says simply, "All his friends stood at a distance; so also did the women who had accompanied him from Galilee, and they saw all this happen." But Mary is not mentioned. At this moment Mary must have suffered the most terrible trial of her whole life, the one of a mother who sees her son die and finds herself unable to die in his place. Mary must learn to let the Lord act, to let herself be loved by him, to allow herself to be served by him, to be completely

detached from all that might serve her personal wishes as a mother so that one thing alone must happen: salvation through Jesus.

And so Mary, formed in this way to accept the work of salvation as the work of the Father in the Son, *enters fully into the divine plan of salvation and becomes the Mother of the Church*. This makes it possible for her to carry on a work which is not hers and which is neither, in a sense, the work of the Son, but the work of the Father in the Son which she has fully accepted. Thus is Mary formed for the apostolic life, formed by the Word of God, detached from all that might be a personal programming of the Word of God. She is now totally open to the fullness of God's plan for the world. It is for this reason that Luke, who did not mention Mary at the foot of the cross, but spoke of her only generically as among the women who watched, mentions Mary in the midst of the primitive community (Ac 1.14).

As regards Jesus, Mary is now detached from all personal desires, whether intimate, instinctive or immediate. From now on she is ready for God's plan being fulfilled in Jesus for humanity. She is now open for universal motherhood through which all can feel themselves loved equally, without preference, without inferiority, without the need for mediation that might make one person a favorite over another.

Conclusion

This is the painful formation and transformation to which the Mother of the Lord was subjected so that we might come to her with full confidence and acknowledge her throughout the ages, in every place on earth and in every situation, as our Mother, completely given over to God's plan, so that we also, in her Son, might become her children.
