

Preaching Mary

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Mary is undoubtedly the most celebrated woman found in Christian tradition. She is the woman rooted deeply in the rich traditions of the Jewish people, and a bridge builder to other cultures and traditions. She is most important to tradition; without her no story exists. Mary plays a minor role in the Gospel but a major role in the life of Jesus, his followers and the early Church. She is a living icon of how it is possible to unite oneself to God, always doing God's will rather than one's own. She manifested a perfect balance between her seven joys and her seven sorrows. Mary shows *par excellence* how all of us are worthy of God's love and are challenged to be more open to God's graces. She is an exemplar of virtues, especially faith, humility, love and a primary witness of how our faith is to be lived.

She prefigures what the Church is to become, a believing people welcoming God's word and allowing that

word to come alive in us. What Mary is, the Church is invited to become. Karl Rahner wrote in *Our Lady and the Church* that "we must learn to see the Church in our Lady and our Lady in the Church." She is God's masterpiece. St. Bonaventure maintained that God could have created better worlds but not a better mother. After becoming Christ's physical mother, she also became in a sense his Mystical Body. She needs to be placed in a separate category of heroines and heroes.

But all this presents a problem for some preachers. How do we preach Mary without putting her on too lofty a throne? She is some times characterized as a sweet lady, dressed in blue of course, with downcast eyes and a bright halo on her head. According to Jung and his theory of wholeness she was gentle and strong, feeling and thinking. Elizabeth Johnson, CSJ a professor of Theology at Fordham University, in New

York, believes that Mary should be brought into the communion of saints. This would take her down from a pedestal where she has been honored in the past, especially for the divine qualities attributed to her. Some of the divine qualities were her power to work miracles and to save sinners. This exaggerated Marian theology was prevalent at one time because of the deficiencies of the Theology of God, Christology as well as Pneumatology. Leonardo Boff in *The Maternal Face of God* maintains that just as the Son of God became incarnate in Jesus, so also did the Holy Spirit become embodied in Mary. This makes Mary divine which she is not, but very human like any of us. She led a very ordinary life sweeping the floor, cooking meals, and passing her humdrum, uneventful hours in the routine of the day helping her son grow in "wisdom and age and favor before God and others." (Lk. 2:52) Preachers need to emphasize her ordinary life style.

Will the real Mary stand up

Who was the real Mary, or will the real Mary stand up? The calm, self-possessed woman with a dove flying over her head, or a woman who was fearful and not sure what the angel Gabriel meant? Luke certainly gives the answer, "Do not be afraid, Mary, for you have found favor with God." (1:30) According to

St. Bernard her humility was the reason God chose her to be the Mother of God. Like a mirror she reflected all her graces to God.

Mary's story is different than Sarah, Hannah and Elizabeth who longed to be mothers. Hannah asked God to "give your handmaid a male child" because she told Eli that she was "an unhappy woman." (1 Sm 1:11, 15) Elizabeth who was beyond childbearing age exclaimed, "So has the Lord done for me at a time when he has seen fit to take away my disgrace before others." (Lk. 1:25) With Mary God is not responding to a request but looking for a volunteer, someone who didn't realize her mission or someone willing to face the uncharted territory that lay ahead. The other women prayed for motherhood, Mary did not. Who would believe her story how this was accomplished? Joseph initially did not, nor did the people in the village. She was the subject of a vicious rumor and needed to be punished according to tradition. Being innocent, however, she did not cry out like so many Watergate people or politicians, "I am innocent!" Rather, she allowed God to intervene and reveal to Joseph how this was accomplished through the power of the Holy Spirit. What an inspiration for those who have suffered intensely from false rumors like a Cardinal Bernadine.

Mary is at times falsely perceived, even by some preachers, as the mother making us more accessible

to an inaccessible God. With a greater emphasis on the Incarnation, however, we no longer picture Jesus and God so distant from us. Our sinfulness does not widen the gap but as Paul states, "where sin increased, grace overflowed all the more." (Rom. 5:20)

Because Mary heard God's request and accepted it, "Behold, I am the handmaid of the Lord. May it be done to me according to your word," she became the mother of God. (Lk. 1:38) The word "handmaid" is actually a feminine word for slave. She could have said no. Preachers need to point out how every woman has the choice of being an Eve or a Mary.

Her assent constituted a crucial turning point in the history of salvation. Her faith made it possible for a God-man's entrance into history. Her faith, as some believe, was greater than the faith of Abraham. All her other glories can be traced to this one, her willingness to be the Mother of God. She was not passive in her assent but active. St. Augustine expressed it well when he wrote that she conceived the word in her mind before giving the Word a body in her womb. St. Thomas Aquinas wrote, "What God was asking was the consent of the Virgin in the name of all humanity." We can invite our listeners to continue Mary's fiat.

Two opposites, however, were at work, her virginity and her motherhood. Once she consents, the Holy Spirit overshadows her and Mary

conceives the Word made flesh. Now she becomes what every mother becomes, a human mother who will have to wait until her child is born, nurse, teach and rear the child into adulthood. Pope Paul VI wrote, "She (Mary) is held up as an example to the faithful for the way in which in her own particular life she fully and responsibly accepted the will of God, because she heard the word of God and acted on it... She is worthy of imitation because she was the first and most perfect disciple."

Discipleship

Mary is the first and perfect disciple because she hears God's word, accepts it and gives her yes. A true disciple is someone who is open to God's will and willing to carry it in one's life. Mary makes discipleship a lived reality. She becomes a disciple to her Son. Discipleship requires having the mind of Jesus, "I do not seek my own will but the will of the one who sent me." (Jn. 5:30) Mary, however, did not know where this discipleship would lead her; no script was given her about Bethlehem, Egypt, the loss of the child in the temple, Nazareth, Cana and especially Calvary. She could identify with countless innocent children who are killed or die each day. Mary knew what it was like to be a displaced person or a refugee in a foreign land. She felt the pain of loss of her child

in the temple like parents who feel the loss of their child to drugs, gangs or runaways. Her widowhood undoubtedly brought many tears as well when she held Jesus in her arms after he had been taken down from the cross.

Jesus made it clear "Whoever does not carry his own cross and come after me cannot be my disciple." (Lk. 14:27) Simeon when predicting the future of Mary's child said, "You yourself a sword will pierce" (Lk. 2:35) All her sufferings culminated on Calvary. There Mary stands beneath the foot of the cross powerless, unable to wipe the sweat from his brow or give him a drink of water. Mary with all her privileges is powerless, except to unite her sufferings to her Son's. Preachers can point out how powerless their listeners feel at times when they face some tragedy.

Mary, however, never retracted her assent or cried out like Jeremiah, "You duped me, O Lord, and I let myself be duped." (20:7) No wonder when a woman cried out to Jesus, "Blessed is the womb that carried you.." he replied, "Rather, blessed are those who hear the word of God and observe it" (Lk. 11:27-28) Mary is more blessed because she continued to say yes to God. In the depths of her being she realizes how her response to God leads to helping others. She is the model for Christian discipleship. As Bertrand Ruby, S.M. states, "Mary is a model for our faith

for she is the most experienced of disciples knowing him from the crib to the Cross, and again when the fullness of Jesus' spirit comes at Pentecost, she is present as a disciple among other disciples."

The Council Fathers struggled what to do with Mary. They considered her very important, but did not want to make a separate document so they included her in a final chapter of *Lumen Gentium*, which stressed the universal call to holiness, "The mother of God is a model of the Church in the areas of faith, of love, and of perfect union with Christ." (No. 63) She continues to remind us, "Do whatever he tells you." (Jn. 2:5)

Mary hears Gabriel's words "for nothing will be impossible for God." (Lk. 1:37) Preachers can offer this as a challenge to listeners: do we believe this, is this how we live? Sarah doubted that she could have a child and even laughed saying, "Now that I am so withered and my husband is so old, am I still to have sexual pleasure?" (Gen. 18:12) Mary replaces the doubt with discipleship becoming the handmaid of the Lord. This recalls Joel's words, "Even upon the servant and the handmaids, in those days, I will pour out my spirit." (3:2) These words also echo Hannah's request for a child when she says, "Think kindly of your maid-servant." (1 Sam. 1:18) Mary's response indicated her firm commitment to a God who makes all things possible.

Visitation

Mary showed how human she was by seeking companionship and being concerned about Elizabeth. By immediately visiting Elizabeth she inaugurated the mission of Church. A huge contrast exists between Mary and Elizabeth. For Elizabeth her pregnancy removed disgrace; for Mary pregnancy brought disgrace especially for Joseph. The angel Gabriel appeared to Zechariah, not Elizabeth, to Mary and not to Joseph. Mary initiated the visit and spoke far more than Elizabeth when they met. The child stirring for joy in Elizabeth's womb is reminiscent of Rebecca's two children jostling in her womb. (Gen. 25:22) Elizabeth cried out to Mary, "Blessed are you among women and blessed the fruit of your womb," (Lk. 1:42) which recalls how Jael was blessed by Deborah, "Blessed among women be Jael, blessed among tent-making women." (Jgs. 5:24) Judith was also called blessed among women. (15:10)

Mary as preacher

The key passage "When Elizabeth heard Mary's greeting, the infant leaped in her womb, and Elizabeth, filled with the Holy Spirit..." (Lk. 1:41) shows that when Mary speaks to Elizabeth she is filled with the Holy Spirit and there is movement in

Elizabeth's womb. Here you have a combination of greeting, embrace and Word that communicated the power of the Holy Spirit. A good preacher needs Word and gestures as much as an artist needs canvas and paint. Mary, in a sense, became a preacher using her God-given gift to share her good news with Elizabeth. She realized how her gift needed to be shared and is willing to do so fulfilling what Jesus said, "Without cost you have received; without cost you are to give." (Mt. 10:8) Preachers need to realize that the Word is gift and we have to fashion it so that the Word can be sown in receptive ground and then enfolded in the hearts of their listeners. Mary's greeting acted as a soothing balm to Elizabeth. So also must the preacher's words while proclaiming the Good News to one's listeners. Both women had to wait as Henri Nouwen pointed out: "Elizabeth and Mary came together and enabled each other to wait. These two women created space for each other to wait. They affirmed for each other that something was happening that was worth waiting for..(It is) one of the Bible's most beautiful expressions of what it means to form community, to be together, gathered around a promise, affirming that something is really happening." Preachers often have to wait before their homilies finally take shape into a meaningful message. The process cannot be rushed and hence the need

to start early in the preparation. Jesus began his first public preaching in the Nazareth synagogue when he took the scroll of Isaiah and unrolled it proclaiming, "The Spirit of the Lord is upon me..." (Lk. 4:18) Mary began her public preaching when she heard Elizabeth say in response to her Word, "And how does this happen to me, that the mother of my Lord should come to me?" (Lk. 1:43)

Good preaching entails serving others as we proclaim the Good News to others. Like Mary we pour out our giftedness, or like the artist we display an array of colors on the canvas of people's hearts and minds. Elizabeth knew that God was with Mary. Do people sense that God is speaking through us by our preaching? Mary was a mirror reflecting God's goodness and love to Elizabeth. Is our preaching a mirror reflecting that same goodness and love? Elizabeth responded with joy as the baby leapt in her womb because of Mary's words. Does our preaching bring joy to our listeners as they more fully realize the power of the Spirit within them? People at times say to us, "I enjoyed your homily." But, like Mary, we need to always remember that we are not the source but rather God working through us.

When Mary and Elizabeth met they embraced each other and were in unison much like a pair of figure skaters perform in unison. Good preaching links the preacher and audience so God's word can touch both

of them and help them discover the deeper meaning of the scriptures in their daily lives. As Meister Eckhart said so well, "What does it avail me that this birth (of God's Word in the soul) is always happening, if it does not happen to me?"

Magnificat

Mary's Magnificat is a goldmine for preachers where she reveals her deep spirituality portrayed by her exclaiming, "The Mighty One has done great things for me." (Lk. 1:49) Avery Cardinal Dulles, S.J. writes that she might be characterized as patroness of "little people," the anawim, who are marginalized, downtrodden, and despised. "For he has looked upon his handmaid's lowliness." (Lk. 1:48) She courageously prophesies, "All ages will call me blessed." (Lk. 1:48) We might ask where does Mary say no in the Gospels because her life was a continual yes to God? When she said, "He has dispersed the arrogant of mind and heart. He has thrown down the rulers from their thrones...the rich he has sent away empty." (Lk. 1:51-53)

First contemplative

Mary did not understand what was happening in her life or her Son's but "kept all these things, reflecting on them in her heart." (Lk. 2:19) Truly

she was the first contemplative and was able to find the perfect balance in her active life as was evident at the Cana celebration where she acts as a catalyst. Her inner silence at other times offers a powerful example of how God speaks to us when we are silent. She guarded her profound gifts with the deepest silence and reserve, not boasting about them or parading them before others. Her sharing with Elizabeth is a powerful example of shared prayer. Both of them give praise and thanks for what God has done in their lives. She continues to be the woman of prayer helping the early community as is brought out in the Acts, "All these devoted themselves with one accord to prayer, together with some women, and Mary the mother of Jesus, and his brothers." (1:14) Preachers need to encourage their listeners to a spirit of contemplation, silence and deeper prayer.

"The Virgin Mary has been more of an inspiration to more people than any other woman who ever lived," writes Jaroslav Pelikan. She will continue to be that provided we preachers give her proper attention in our homilies and not romanticize her. She has left us a powerful legacy and is truly the woman for all times. Are we ready to preach Mary?

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