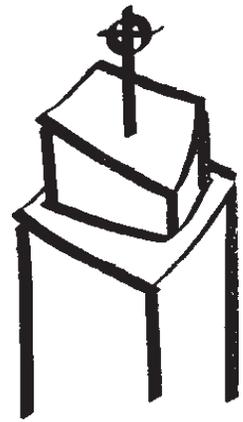


OUR FAMILY



NEWS



For Oblates of St. Bede Abbey, Peru, Illinois

March &
April, 2018

MARY, MOTHER OF THE CHURCH

In March of this year Pope Francis decreed that “the Memorial of the Blessed Virgin Mary, Mother of the Church, should be inscribed in the Roman Calendar on the Monday after Pentecost and be now celebrated every year.” Mary has been acknowledged as Mother of the Church since at least the time of St. Augustine, and the title was officially conferred on her by Blessed Paul VI in 1964. However, Christ himself gave this role to his mother when from the cross he said, “Behold your son,” and thus entrusted to her, “all people, in the person of the beloved disciple, as sons and daughters to be reborn unto life eternal.” Mary’s presence in the upper room with the other disciples at Pentecost, the birthday of the Church, affirms her acceptance of this role. In this piece, I would like to explore some considerations of this title by focusing on the events in Mary’s life that bookend her motherhood of Jesus, the Annunciation and the Crucifixion.

Many great artists have painted their interpretation of the Annunciation scene, and you can find it depicted in stained glass in almost any Catholic church. Frequently, these show a young, serene, fair-skinned Mary in an idealized setting, sometimes even with a prayer book in her hand. This is Mary viewed through the eyes of faith. However, these beautiful images can lead us to lose the real human being who was Mary of Nazareth.

Mary was probably fourteen or fifteen when she received her visit from the Angel Gabriel. This was not an unusual age for a young woman to be betrothed, given that the average life expectancy for a man was between 30-35 and less for a woman because of the high rate of maternal death in childbirth. Though tradition tells us that her parents were Anne and Joachim, we have no real knowledge of her family situation other than that they were Jewish and lived in the little rural village of Nazareth. This means that, at best, Joachim was a craftsman, but most likely he was a peasant farmer.

In other words, Mary was the daughter of a poor family living in the countryside of a land bent under the cruel reality of Roman occupation. She would have spent her days as other poor women do: fetching water, tending to animals, preparing food over a smoky fire, looking out for the children of her extended family. Her betrothal to Joseph might have meant a slight move up in society, as he is identified as a *tekton*, a craftsman.

It is to this poor, young woman that the angel Gabriel is sent by God to inform her that she is “highly favored” and will conceive through the power of the Holy



Spirit and bear a child who will be called “Son of the Most High.” Note, the angel is sent to Mary, not to her father, nor, as in Matthew’s gospel, to her husband-to-be. In a patriarchal society in which woman had so little standing that their testimony was not considered valid, the messenger from God speaks directly to a young woman. Many scholars have explored in detail the exchange between Mary and Gabriel, so I will not attempt to do so. I will only ask that you think of the scene as unfolding slowly. Our recitation of the Hail Mary or the Angelus can lead us to believe that the encounter was over in a flash. It wasn’t.

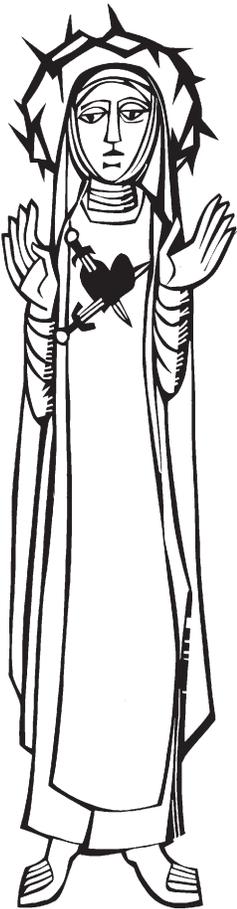
Luke gives us clues to the deliberate pace of the exchange. After Gabriel addresses her, “Hail, favored one. The Lord is with you,” we are told that Mary, “was greatly troubled at what was said and pondered what sort of greeting this might be” (Lk 1:28-29). This is a thoughtful, attentive, young woman. Like Moses before the burning bush, she is curious but cautious. After Gabriel has outlined God’s plan to her, Mary questions, “How can this be, since I have no relations with a man?” (Lk 1:34). There is a degree of confidence and self-assurance in this woman. She wants to fully understand before she assents. Only after Gabriel has told her of the intervention of the Holy Spirit and of her cousin Elizabeth’s pregnancy, assuring her that, “Nothing will be impossible for God,” does she give her consent, “Behold, I am the handmaid of the Lord. May it be done to me according to your word” (Lk 1:37-38). At that moment, the eternal Mother-Son bond between Mary and Christ begins.

This is a vocation story. Mary is called to do a particular work to further God’s plan of salvation, and after due consideration, she freely gives her assent. She has been chosen to give voice to the Word of God in a way none of the prophets of old could have imagined. She can have no idea where this commitment will take her, but she has come to trust both the messenger and the message. She will accept this child, nurture and love him, and pray that the God of her ancestors will protect and guide him.

If the Annunciation marks Mary’s first experience of being part of Christ’s earthly life, the Crucifixion marks her last. Only in the gospel of John is Mary explicitly mentioned as being present at the crucifixion of her son. The other three gospels all mention women who had accompanied Jesus from Galilee as being present, so it is quite possible that Mary was with them. Except for the anonymous “disciple whom Jesus loved,” Jesus’ male followers fled, perhaps fearful that they, too, would be crucified. The women stayed. They had no way of knowing what the Romans might do to them. Although Pilate might not bother to arrest them, unprotected women in the presence of occupying soldiers are always at risk for both physical and sexual abuse. We have far too much evidence of this happening today to doubt that it was a reality two thousand years ago.

Yet, Mary was present as her son was crucified, seeing his every wound, hearing his every cry, enduring in her own person the taunts and the insults hurled at him and, perhaps, at her, too. She can do nothing to ease his pain; she can only stand in silent solidarity with him, witnessing her discipleship by her presence. As Joseph is absent from Christ’s adult ministry, Mary is most probably a widow, among the lowest and most precarious of social situations. Now she is about to lose her only son, her only possible source of support, and in a manner that would make her a pariah, unwelcome anywhere “truly religious” people assembled. At this awful moment her son asks one more thing of her, that she take to herself, in the person of the beloved disciple, all of his followers for all times. The mother of Jesus of Nazareth, this peasant woman of unknown heritage, becomes Mother of the Church.

Why does it matter that we realize that poverty with all its attendant difficulties was the reality of Mary of Nazareth, Mother of the Church? Almost 70% of the world’s Catholics today live in what is called the global south—Africa, Asia and Central and South America. The bulk of these people are themselves struggling with the problems of poverty: lack of access to safe water, healthcare, good education, and economic mobility. Among these, the



poorest and most vulnerable are women. According to the United Nations Commission on the Status of Women, two-thirds of these women are illiterate. They perform two-thirds of the world's work but earn only one-tenth of the world's income and own one-hundredth of the world's property.

Mary of Nazareth can relate to their struggles. She knows the grinding burden of poverty, knows what it is like to do hard physical work, knows the anguish of being unable to feed your child, knows what it means to place your trust in the always faithful God of Israel who hears the cry of the poor. Mary knew, too, the violence of revolutionary resistance, since Galilee, the region where Nazareth is located, was well-known for rebellion. So, when poor women in war-torn countries like Iraq or Nigeria find their families threatened by fighters from both sides of a conflict, she knows and understands their fear. Mary, who had to flee to Egypt to escape Herod's murderous rampage is one with refugee women from Syria or Myanmar or El Salvador who clutch their children close as they abandon their homes to escape bombs and terrorists and gangs, risking perilous journeys in hopes of finding a place of refuge.

Mary, who stood silent witness to her Son's unjust execution, was with Las Madres de Plaza de Mayo, the mothers of children "disappeared" by the military dictatorship in Argentina, who fearlessly gathered every week in front of the Presidential palace holding pictures of their missing children and demanding to know what had happened to them. She was with the Irish mothers Mairead Maguire and Betty Williams, one Protestant, one Catholic, who formed the Irish Women for Peace and risked ridicule and death threats to bring about an end to "the troubles" in Northern Ireland. And this year, on the eve of the Annunciation, as I watched 18-year old Emma Gonzalez stand before the United States Capitol in dignified grief and silence for over six minutes as she and a crowd in excess of 300,000 mourned her seventeen murdered classmates and teachers from Emily Stoneman Douglas high school, I thought of Mary.

Theologian Elizabeth Johnson notes, "Mary is sister to the marginalized women who live unchronicled lives in oppressive situations." Let us remember these women, our sisters, this year on the Monday after Pentecost as we honor Mary, Mother of the Church. Mary, poor woman of Nazareth, Mother of the Church, pray for us.

Sources:

Congregation of Divine Worship and Discipline of the Sacraments. "Decree on the celebration of the Blessed Virgin Mary Mother of the Church in the General Roman Calendar" (March 3, 2018).

Elizabeth Johnson, "Mary of Nazareth: Friend of God and Prophet," *America*, (June 17, 2000).

---Kathy Martin



Our Family News is published in the special interest of the oblates of St. Bede Abbey. Please send changes of address and comments to The Editor, Our Family News, St. Bede Abbey, 24 W US Highway 6, Peru, IL 61354.

We welcome your submissions to this publication, either instructive or reflective, whether prose or poetry. They should in some way relate to the **Rule of Benedict**, Benedictine spirituality, and/or the oblate program. The editor reserves the rights to choose material for publication and to edit as necessary.

SCHEDULE OF UPCOMING MEETINGS

Meetings are held in the abbey church from
1:30 P.M. to 4:30 P.M.

Sunday, April 8, 2018
Sunday, May 6, 2018

Passage for *Lectio* at the April Meeting

For you were once darkness, but now you are light in the Lord. Live as children of light (for the fruit of the light consists in all goodness, righteousness and truth) and find out what pleases the Lord. Have nothing to do with the fruitless deeds of darkness, but rather expose them. For it is shameful even to mention what the disobedient do in secret. But everything exposed by the light becomes visible, for it is light that makes everything visible. This is why it is said:

"Wake up, O sleeper,
rise from the dead,
and Christ will shine on you."

Ephesians 5:8-14

Passage for *Lectio* at the May Meeting

Be very careful, then, how you live--not as unwise but as wise, making the most of every opportunity, because the days are evil. Therefore do not be foolish, but understand what the Lord's will is. Do not get drunk on wine, which leads to debauchery. Instead, be filled with the Spirit. Speak to one another with psalms, hymns and spiritual songs. Sing and make music in your heart to the Lord, always giving thanks to God the Father for everything, in the name of our Lord Jesus Christ.

Submit to one another out of reverence for Christ.

Ephesians 5:15-21

Abbey Prayer Schedule

Visitors are welcome to join the monks for Mass and for the hours of the Divine Office. Conventual Mass is celebrated on the first level of the abbey church, the hours of the Divine Office on the second level. During the school year, the monks' schedule is as follows.

5:45 A.M. Morning Prayer*
7:45 A.M. Conventual Mass**
12:00 Noon Midday Prayer
5:30 P.M. Evening Prayer***
* on Sunday, 7:00 A.M.
** on Sunday, 10:00 A.M.
*** on Saturday & Sunday, 5:00 P.M.

