

# S A N Y A S A

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# MARY: THE PROTOTYPE OF RELIGIOUS LIFE

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## 1. INTRODUCTION

“More honorable than the cherubim and far more glorious than the Seraphim” is a liturgical description of the Mother of God.<sup>1</sup> Our Lord never commanded such love and devotion to His mother. Rather, the Christian witness that Mary gave, has inspired this poetic religious fervor and devotion throughout the centuries. The Mother of God has been seen by the faithful as the Christian *par excellence*. Imitation of her example can lead to an eternal life with her son. In her being taken up to heaven, we see the possibility for ourselves, not so much as a Dormition but an ascension.<sup>2</sup>

## 2. MARIAN PROTOTYPE

Religious, in particular, can discover in the faith and devotion of Mary, a prototype of the suitable qualities of their vocation.

### 2.1. Partakers of the Divine Nature

We choose the “how” of the way we live to attain the promised everlasting life with God. In all of our thoughts and actions, we reach out to touch God. Mary, the woman, touched the divine.

In iconography the Mother of God is seen clothed in blue with a red mantle. Her son is with a red inner garment and a blue mantle. The red symbolizes divinity and the blue humanity. Christ is the God who took upon himself humanity. Mary is the human, who became clothed in divinity.

The reason for this lies in the creation of humanity. Humanity was created in the “image and likeness of God.” This was the beginning of the process of the divinization of all humanity. This way of being one with God was the divine

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intention in creation. This process was interrupted not by divine design but by human sin. God's intention for humanity is not thwarted but postponed. In the fullness of time God continued the process.<sup>3</sup> "God became man so that man might become God."<sup>4</sup> The Son was sent so that we may become "partakers of the divine nature" (2 Pet 1:4).

Mary because of the incarnation is most like God in that she partook of divinity. She is ascribed a glory and an honor higher than any angel or man because she is most in the image and likeness of God. Mary is most like God. Religious are by calling meant to be more like God. These last words express the ideal that can be actualized in the here and now.

The likeness in Mary's case is not just due to her moral righteousness but more so to her ontological state of being all-holy and most pure. One is holy and one is pure not because of the absence of evil but because of the indwelling of the Spirit. Only one is holy and that is God. Holiness exists in the participation in the divine nature. In Mary's divine maternity we see holiness. The Virgin's life and will were in synergy with God. It was not her will, but rather His will be done. "I am the handmaid of the Lord be it done to me as you say" (Lk 1:38). Her nature lived in and partook of the divine nature.

## **2.2. The Womb of God and Contemplation**

This synergy is not because of what the Mother of God did. Her external charity of rushing off to see Elizabeth is not what made her holy, but rather her openness to the divine will. Her openness is only possible if Mary was truly a contemplative. Many of the Fathers of the Church call Mary the "womb of God."<sup>5</sup> The "womb," in this sense, is not just her reception of the divine life that dwelt within her, but her receptivity of the word of God. It was in hearing the word that led to salvation. St John of Damascus writes: "But she, the truly blessed above all, inclined her ear to the Word of God and was filled by the workings of the Holy Spirit and through the Father's good pleasure, announced by the archangel, became pregnant."<sup>6</sup>

The womb of God's contemplative nature is also revealed in the celebration of the presentation in the Temple of the Mother of God. This event is not found in Scripture but in the apocryphal writings. There is probably no basis in fact for such a feast, but its popularity and staying power on the liturgical calendar is more than likely due to its expression of Mary freely choosing to be open to the activity of God.

When one is open to the activity of God, one is open to the Spirit. The Holy Spirit is referred to as "life-giving." In the overshadowing of Mary we have a

life giving activity of the Spirit, but since Mary is in the image of God, she too becomes life-giving. One does not keep God to oneself but rather God's life within us bursts forth from us. Mary in her maternity and as the Mother of the Church is still life giving. Iconography of the Mother of God shows her holding her divine son in her arm with her other hand pointing gently to him. She knows that her son is the word of life and is desirous that all will have life through her son. Her divine maternity grew at the cross to being the Mother of the Church. She shows the world that the way to the Father is through her son and in the life-giving Spirit.

As Religious there is a search for holiness. This holiness is not found in external acts of charity but in contemplation of the One. Mary's contemplation did not find her withdrawn from the world but at the center of it. Religious life becomes life giving when it is spirit-filled. Each and every day the Religious chooses to be a hearer of the word. So in being a receptacle of divine life, one has divine life to partake and to share.

The Church is our treasure, but it is also something that we plant in the world through our ministries. The word of God was something that Mary too treasured and shared. We are told in scripture that she treasured all of these things and reflected upon them in her heart (Lk 2: 19). Mary saw the wonder of the angels heralding the birth of her son, and also her son baffle and bewilder the teachers in the temple. She did not put them away like we put away pictures of faded memories but rather reflected upon them. As she saw her son travel to teach, she reflected upon his words in light of the wonderment of his birth and the announcement of the angel.

Mary was not removed from the center of the Church because of her experiences, but rather her treasures placed her at the center of the early community. She was present at the foot of the cross and when the apostles received the Spirit on Pentecost. She did not remove herself to cling to the glory of her son's birth but knowing what she did she was called to leave the security of home and follow. She had to watch the activity of the world of God grow in the world. Mary was not contemplative in her withdrawal from the world but she was contemplative in her hearing of the word in the world. Contemplation of divine realities and constant union with God are qualities of Mary that are exemplary to all Religious.

### **2.3. Faith**

These qualities demand faith, which is a gift with which Mary was truly blessed. The virgin's faith was apparent at the Annunciation. She did not question the reality that she would have a child. If God said it was going to happen, it was

going to happen. Her question comes from her human experience. "How can this be since I do not know a man?" (Lk 1:34). Her question also comes from her faith, for she was a consecrated virgin and her faith told her that she was going to remain a virgin. Faith is bold even in the face of an angel. Mary knew that her vocation was to be a virgin and an angel told her that she was going to be a mother and yet she still knew that she was going to remain a virgin. Virginal maternity was unheard of and there was no basis for it in Jewish tradition. The prophecy of Isaiah that a virgin shall give birth was understood in the sense of a young woman having a child. It is only in the Marian experience that we come to the true knowledge of Isaiah's word. It is only in the virginal maternity of Mary that we can see the completion of all forms of creation. Normally creation involves a man and a woman. Adam was created from neither a man or a woman. Eve was created from man alone. The only form of creation left for the Word made flesh was from woman alone and that woman was the Virgin of Nazareth.

Faith is also always prepared to accept the unexpected. Mary thought her consecrated virginity meant that she was not going to have a child. Then the unexpected visit from the archangel Gabriel. It is imaginable that when our Lord as a youth at the temple expounded upon Scripture Mary that night probably said to Joseph, "Jesus is going to be a great teacher." Yet Jesus then worked in Joseph's carpentry shop through his adult life. Age thirty was "old" age at the time of Christ. But Mary accepted the unexpected. Then when Jesus should have been enjoying the rewards of his labors in the shop, he begins a ministry. Mary probably did not expect the rejection of her son in this new role by the people in the town in which they lived. She probably thought even if they disagreed they would be polite. When Jesus went into Jerusalem on that Palm Sunday, she must have said to herself: "My son is going to be a great earthly ruler." She probably did not expect the crucifixion, but she was there for her son. She may have hoped in the resurrection but probably did not expect it.

Mary knew that certain realities in faith are absolute but most are unexpected. If a Religious firmly believes that they have a vocation it is here that the faith is bold. The living out of that vocation involves more of the unexpected than the expected. A vocation in terms of a calling is a beginning. Like Mary, we should respond, "be it done to me as you say" (Lk 1:38). Once you have accepted the call of the Lord, where you are going is a mystery.

#### **2.4. The Divine Plan**

There is a divine plan for the salvation of the world. The virgin was willing to cooperate with the plan. Religious too must accept that it is God's plan rather than their own and be willing to cooperate with it. Mary's vocation and that

of a Religious are both in acceptance of a role in the fulfillment of the divine plan and the willingness to collaborate in divine activities that are related to the plan. Mary then had accepted a role in the messianic activity of her son. All religious by virtue of being called accept a role in the activity of Mary's Son. All of Mary's energies were devoted to the ministry of divine maternity to which she was called. All of a Religious' energies are to be devoted to the service of the Lord.

But then again at the heart of this is that all are called by the gift of faith to serve God. Every Christian in whatever part they play in the plan of God must devote all their energies to carrying out that to which they have been called. The difference for the religious is their public witness to the reality of faith and its call to serve.

### 3. THE PRESENT SITUATION

Is it possible that the shortage of vocations is due to a lack of faith? Rather, there is no shortage of vocations because God is still extending the call. The call is not being responded to by those who are called. God is still calling. God still gives the faith necessary for any calling. We cannot say that God's plan today involves giving less faith to people, but rather like the seed in Scripture, it has withered. Faith needs to be nourished. It is the ministry of Religious to nurture the faith of those who have been entrusted by God to their care in ministry.

A young person today may receive a call, but their question is "How can this be, since I do not know what you are talking about?" Religious are called to witness to their particular way of life while carrying out their Christian witness and ministry. How a member of one Religious community ministers must be different than the ministry given by a member of another. They are still carrying out the same ministry of Christ but in a different manner because of the charisms of their Religious community.

The whole Church is called to minister to the seed of the faith planted in each and every person. We do not know what that seed will grow into until it is grown, but we have to treat it as if it is going to be a great oak. What does this mean? It means that we have to water it with the waters of Baptism and an ongoing sacramental life especially involving regular reception of the Eucharist. It means that we have to feed it with good teaching, sound theological readings, enlightening sermons, heart moving videos, etc. We have to weed around the growing faith. We must remove temptation rather than plant more weeds. The religious are called to be the sowers in the field for the harvest is done by the angels at the end.

There is a legend that at the judgment seat of Christ, a person is asked only one or two questions. The first question is "Did you come alone?" Mary could point to her children in faith, Religious point to their children in faith as well. If the answer is "Yes," the second question is: "How could you?"

### 3.1. Daring Initiative

Members of the church seem to be embarrassed to evangelize and catechize. We are the only ones embarrassed. Robert Woodruff after World War I was the President of Coca Cola. His goal was that everyone in the world should have a taste of Coke.<sup>7</sup> Today, you can buy coke in the deserts of Africa or outside the Kremlin gate. Religious need the same commitment and dedication. Everyone should have a taste of the charisma of their community. It takes daring to be a Religious.

Daring initiative is also seen in the life of the Mother of God at the wedding feast in Cana. When they ran out of wine, she could have gone neighbor to neighbor asking for contributions to the feast, but this would have embarrassed the young couple and their families. Rather she went to her son. There was nothing in their family life up to that point which could have suggested that Jesus was capable of such a miracle. Despite the medieval legends, Jesus as a child did not turn stones into birds or a playmate into a statue. We know from the reaction of his towns' people that they did not think of him as a miracle worker, when they threw him out of their synagogue.

To ask for a miracle where a miracle has never been seen requires a great deal of daring faith. In Mary at Cana we get a foretaste of the faith her son would speak of, "How blest are they who have not seen, yet believed" (Jn 21:29). The disciples believed after the miracle, but Mary believed before the miracle.

Our Lord in response said, "Woman, how is this concern of yours involve me?" In calling her woman, she is reminded that as a woman and even as His mother, her status was not sufficient to overcome the fact that it was not his time. Mary's faith then dared again. She told the servants to do what he tells them to do. Her faith told her that her son could change the hour. The request was granted because of Mary's perseverance in faith.

God like a Father at times waits to be asked. In the divine scheme of things, yes it was the honor but Mary's faithful collaboration was required by God. Just as Mary's faithful collaboration was needed at the Annunciation to bring about the Incarnation, her collaboration by way of her intercession at Cana was needed to bring about Jesus' messianic ministry.<sup>8</sup>

Religious too need daring faith. Great saints have gone and done things that everyone said was impossible. But, they in turn responded in faith by acknowledging this was the divine will. As at Cana there was more and better wine than what would be expected. When faith releases divine activity, it comes in abundance. God says to the Religious: "I have given you the faith sufficient to move mountains; believe and dare that you can and the mountains will be moved."

### **3.2. Barriers to Ministry**

Sometimes we place artificial barriers in our ministries because we don't want to intrude. We do not want to interrupt a person's grief or we do not want to "force" our faith on anyone else because they are free to believe whatever they want. Daring faith is intrusive. We can see that our Lord himself intruded. The widow of Naim was grieving. Jesus stopped the funeral procession. Yes, the woman appreciated greatly the miracle, but she probably was not expecting a miracle when Jesus interrupted the trip to the cemetery. She may have been upset at this intrusion, but she needed the miracle. Zacchaeus was watching to see the Messiah and Jesus invited himself to his home. Zacchaeus didn't start the conversation, Jesus did by stating that he was going to eat at Zacchaeus' house. Zacchaeus too was probably upset because it meant that he had to defend himself against his neighbors' accusations. In both cases Jesus intruded. The Religious too must intrude where salvation is the issue. To fail to intrude when there is the danger of the loss of eternal life is unconscionable. It is better to err on the side of salvation than to let a sheep be lost out of courtesy.

Mary's faith was always based in her willingness to collaborate with the plan of God. She desired that her messianic son be revealed and it was getting late. As consecrated persons, Religious are called to collaborate with the plan of God and all of their energies must be used in carrying out that plan because the time is late. Consecrated persons must seize every opportunity no matter how unrelated it may appear.

The Virgin of Cana reminds us that even when God says, "No." one does not stop having daring faith. Her Son had told her it was not the time, yet she still told the steward to do whatever Jesus instructs. In this she was a faithful daughter of Abraham, who "negotiated" with God to save Sodom, and secured the safety of Lot and his family.

Too often Religious are prone to cease activity because they feel it is God's will. If God does not send us vocations, so be it. It must be God's plan, they say. Mary would continue on as if vocations were still plentiful knowing that



somehow her son would provide. The crucifixion must have shaken the faith of the Virgin of Cana, but she was there at the foot of the cross, as she also there at Pentecost.

### 3.3. Pain of Ministry

The young girl of faith at the Annunciation was not promised an easy life. She heard the prophecy that her gently loving heart would feel the pain of the sword. She felt that pain when her town's people rejected her son. She felt that pain when the religious leaders arose against their messiah. She felt that pain as her only son was sentenced to death by the Roman authorities. Her heart was surrounded with pain as her son had a crown of thorns placed upon his head. No mother ever wants to experience the death of her child. This pain was multiplied a thousandfold by the manner of the crucifixion.

Nowhere does Scripture tell us that Mary was surprised by any of these happenings. She had listened to the Good News that her son preached. She probably understood that the messiah was to suffer as expressed by the prophet Isaiah (Is 53). Even though she knew what was to come, it did not lessen the pain that she felt.

Religious too know that the message to which they witness is not one that society and the world welcome. The message of sin and repentance, of crucifixion and resurrection, of darkness and light and of death and life is one that is in direct opposition to the teachings of the world. The world says the winner is the person who dies with the most possessions. The Religious stands out in poverty. Religious life is and has always been counter-cultural. Followers of the Master can expect no less opposition than the master himself received. Religious then should not be surprised when civil authorities oppose their acts of charity and social justice. Religious should expect looks of disgust given to them because of their witness of Christian values. If Christ himself did not give his own Mother a pleasant and peaceful life, should any Religious expect one.

### CONCLUSION

Mary held in her heart the treasure of a messianic faith. This treasure was her pearl of great price. Religious too, if they are going to meet a hostile world must hold onto the same messianic faith. It is a faith in a God who loves his creation and has promised to send a redeemer and kept His promise.

## Endnotes

- 1 As found in both the Divine Liturgies of St. John Chrysostom and St. Basil the Great”
- 2 Falling Asleep
- 3 Paul Blowers, “Divinization,” *The New Westminster Dictionary of Church History*, edited by Robert Benedetto, James O. Duke. (Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox, 2008), 201-202.
- 4 Athanasius, *On the Incarnation*. 93 (8.54).
- 5 George A. Maloney, *Mary: The Womb of God*. (Denville, NJ: Dimension Books, 1976.)
- 6 John of Damascus, *Sermon II On the Assumption*. 171.
- 7 Mark Pendergrast. *For God, Country and Coca-Cola*. (New York, NY: Basic Books, 2000), 169.
- 8 *Orthodox Study Bible*. (Thomas Nelson, 1982), 1424.