

Thoughts about Mary, given at our Marian Pilgrimage 1st May, 2021

By Dr Anne Inman

Mary, the embodiment of faith

In an Advent Reflection here in this church to mark the Feast of the Immaculate Conception, I discussed how Mary most perfectly lived out the life of faith. The Catechism of the Catholic Church says that *Mary* is the ‘most perfect embodiment’ of the faith we find in Abraham (144). This afternoon I want to begin our reflection by reminding us of Mary’s great faith, before considering the complex question of how we might most suitably venerate Mary as the Mother of God, and pray to her for our own needs.

Abraham, after accepting God’s plan for him as revealed by the Lord, left his country and his kindred and his father’s house and set out into a land he did not know (Gen 12.1).¹ In a similar way, after accepting God’s will for her at the Annunciation, Mary immediately set out. First, she travelled to the hill country of Judea to visit Elizabeth. Her second trip was again to Judea to be registered at Bethlehem, and from there Matthew tells us that she went down into Egypt, a land she did not know, before returning to Galilee.

Difficult as these journeys would have been for her during her pregnancy and then with the threat of assassination hanging over her infant child, she had already made the more momentous break from her previous life. When she accepted to become a mother outside marriage, she was stepping outside the normal conventions of the patriarchal family structure, which had afforded her security and protection, and she was very likely to bring dreadful shame upon both herself and her family. This was surely an extraordinary act of faith; a terrifying step into the unknown. Both literally and symbolically, like Abraham, she set out to lands she did not know. Mary’s life therefore provides the perfect example of the life of faith, lived as a fully human being at a particular time in history. Equally Mary is honoured in the Catholic Church as the mother of God.

Those of you who have been following, or at least trying to follow, the television drama *Line of Duty*, will have heard Adrian Dunbar, who plays Chief Superintendent Ted Hastings barely contain his exasperation at the corruption that is increasingly coming to light as he mutters phrases like ‘Jesus, Mary and Joseph’, and ‘Mother of God’. *The Tablet Arts Critic* writes,

Unlike those who exclaim sacred names (‘God’, ‘Jesus’) in a secular or unthinking manner, Ted’s supplications are devout. The Mother of God is Mary, whose child Jesus is, through Trinitarian doctrine, God the Son, to God the Father.²

¹ Cf Anne Inman, ‘Mary the woman of faith: a credible role model’, in *The Pastoral Review*, November/December 2012, 11.

² *The Tablet Arts* 1st May 2021

Mary Theotokos / God-Bearer
Mother of God
Council of Ephesus 431



At the Council of Ephesus in 431, Mary was formally declared to be *Theotokos*, which means God-Bearer; she gave birth to God. Mary's son Jesus, would be declared a fully divine person, fully God, 'conceived by the Holy Spirit', who was at the same time completely human, born of a concrete historical, fully human woman. When Jesus was born to Mary, the Word (the Eternal God) became flesh.

If Mary were not a fully human person, the whole basis for the incarnation would be undermined. God would not have dwelt among us as one of us. This raises questions as to how the Church's teachings on Mary are to be understood. What does it mean, for example, to say that Mary was conceived without original sin? This afternoon, as we honour Mary at her shrine here in Hartley, and as we bring to her our petitions, I want us to reflect on how we might approach the doctrine of Mary's Immaculate Conception, and to consider how to pray the various elements of the 'Hail Mary', honouring her as Mother of God, without seeming to sever her from the reality of her life on earth.

Hail Mary, Full of Grace

First let us think about what we mean when we say, 'Hail Mary, full of grace'. The Catholic Church teaches that Mary was conceived without original sin. This is what is meant by the doctrine of the Immaculate Conception, which is celebrated every year on 8th December. In my experience, even some Catholics who hold this feast in high esteem, misunderstand what is meant by the term 'Immaculate Conception'. It simply means that Mary was without sin for her entire life from its very beginning.

As the theologian Elizabeth Johnson says, while this doctrine speaks in the language of the absence of sin, in essence the teaching is all about the presence of grace. Being conceived without original sin does not mean that Mary was conceived in a vacuum. The opposite of sin is grace. Mary was uniquely gifted at the outset with the fullness of grace. In this plenitude of grace, she was 'blessed among women', but she was conceived by her parents in a properly human way.

It is important to recognise that while Mary was uniquely full of grace from the outset, all human life is graced. God is the author of all life. Without God's sustaining Spirit there is no life. When God created the world, there was nothing 'outside' God to be used as material for its construction. God created the world *ex nihilo* that is to say 'out of nothing'. The world was created, and only remains in existence, through God's Self-gift, when the Creator breathed it into life through the Spirit, by the Word spoken at creation. God's Spirit is present throughout creation. People of my generation who learnt their catechism in a

Catholic school react immediately to the question ‘Where is God?’ with the automatic reply, ‘God is everywhere’.

The entire story of the Old Testament tells of God’s Spirit

Progressively active in history
From the creation of the world
To God’s total Self-gift to the world
When the Word became flesh in Mary



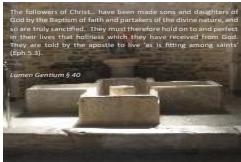
The entire story of the Old Testament tells of God’s Spirit progressively active in history, from the creation of the world to God’s total Self-Gift at the Incarnation, when the Word became flesh through Mary. Mary stood at the created climax of the progressive gift of grace. She was enveloped entirely in the love of God, totally immersed in the Holy Spirit, from the first moment of her existence.

Far from setting Mary apart from us, this brings her as close to us as it is possible to be. As God’s creatures, graced from the beginning of the world, we are the people who have been gifted the Holy Spirit at baptism. The same Spirit that lived in Mary lives in us.

Christians sometimes imagine Jesus to be like the holiest person we can possibly imagine, but even more holy, even more fully made up of the Holy Spirit. This is not an adequate image of Jesus, because it fails to do justice to his full divinity, but it is a very good way to think about Mary. Mary is filled with the gift of the same Spirit who deigns to dwell within us. We are all confronted by the same question that Paul addressed to the people of the church in Corinth, ‘Do you not know that *your* body is a temple of the Holy Spirit within *you?*’ (1.Cor. 6.19, my italics).

This means that we can think of Mary as our sister, as first among the saints. We are all called to be saints. This truth of our Baptism tends to make people very uncomfortable. The church holds up for our veneration as saints the most extraordinary characters, now in heaven, whose lives on earth have been quite unlike our own. Yet when we read the New Testament, we find that no-one who has died is called a saint. Paul addresses his letter to the Colossians, ‘To the saints and faithful brothers and sisters in Christ in Colossae’ (Col. 1.2). Similar greetings are to be found in other letters (Rom. 16.2; 16.15); (2.Cor. 1.1) (Eph. 1.1) (Ph.1.1; 4.21) The saints are those who have been baptised into Christ.

This teaching, that the saints are those who have been baptised into Christ, was reiterated at the Second Vatican Council in its Constitution on the Church, *Lumen Gentium*, in a chapter called ‘The Universal Call to Holiness’.



The followers of Christ... have been made sons and daughters of God by the Baptism of faith and partakers of the divine nature, and so are truly sanctified. They must therefore hold on to and perfect in their lives that holiness which they have received from God. They are told by the apostle to live 'as is fitting among saints' (Eph.5.3).³

As Elizabeth Johnson puts it, 'The community of saints embraces persons who live and breathe at the present moment along with those who have passed into eternal life.'⁴ Johnson suggests that we can think of Mary as first among the communion of saints, and as such as our sister. Among the many ways of thinking about how we might relate to Mary, this way of looking upon her as first among the saints and our sister could be especially useful for those who are looking to Mary for a role-model.

The mother of the Redeemer stands out among the poor and humble of the Lord
Lumen Gentium §55



The official teaching of the Church supports the notion that Mary, as well as being outstanding in her holiness, as well as standing out among us, at the same time stands alongside us. Both ideas are present in *Lumen Gentium* in the chapter on 'Our Lady', as we can see from the slide:

The mother of the Redeemer... stands out among the poor and humble of the Lord, who confidently hope for and receive salvation from him'.

Mary *stands out* among the poor and humble of the Lord. She stands *among* the poor and humble. Because Mary intercedes for us, because she relays our petitions to her Son, it can be tempting to visualise her positioned somewhere between us and God; yet Mary is truly one of us. Mary stands among us as our sister, and as our sister she prays for us.

The life in faith is sometimes pictured in the New Testament as a race we must run. The second Letter to Timothy has Paul saying, 'I have finished the race, I have kept the faith' (2 Tim 4.7); The Letter to the Hebrews has, 'since we are surrounded by so great a cloud of

³ *Lumen Gentium* § 40

⁴ Johnson 312

witnesses, let us also lay aside every weight and the sin that clings so closely, and let us run with perseverance the race that is set before us' (Heb. 12. 1).

I don't usually go in for sporting metaphors, but I am a great fan of the London Marathon: in the London Marathon, everyone who wants to can and does take part, from the best athlete to the straggler who takes days to complete the course, and each one of them is cheered on from the side-lines and at the finishing post.

We might think of the saints as those who have completed the marathon of life, cheering on those who are still in the race, with Mary at their head.

Pray for us sinners

The 'Hail Mary' prayer, like a pilgrimage to Mary's shrine, has two aspects to it: first to honour Mary as 'full of grace', 'blessed among women', 'the mother of God', and secondly to ask her to 'pray for us', who are sinners.

We know that Mary prays for us. Luke's Gospel even reveals to us the very heart of Mary's prayer. In that extraordinary burst of joy, which we call the Magnificat (Lk. 1 46-55), Mary sings out in a prophetic voice, in thanksgiving for our deliverance as a people. Echoing the song of Hannah in the Book of Samuel, Mary exclaims that God's mercy is 'from generation to generation', that 'the hungry are filled with good things', 'the lowly' are 'lifted up', freed from their bondage to their oppressors.

This is the reality that breaks in to our world when Jesus is born of Mary. This is as it were the 'content' of Mary's prayers, which Mary prayed on earth and now prays in heaven. As we ask Mary to join our prayer with hers, we must also join her prayer with ours. Our concern must be for those who are hungry, those who are destitute or down-trodden and so on.

Our own needs

What does this mean for our own individual needs? It is all too easy to think that our concerns are minimal in the great scheme of things. We **who** are not starving as so many are, **who** are not living in fear of our lives, **who** are not wrongly imprisoned or whatever; we **who have had our vaccinations**, and can see our family again, it seems selfish to be concerned about our relatively insignificant worries and obsessions. This way of thinking is a denial of the love that God has for us. It is a denial of the joy that brings the light of Christ into the world.



The fact that it is not selfish at all to pray for our own seemingly minor needs is beautifully illustrated in the story of the marriage feast at Cana, when, at Mary's bidding, Jesus turned water into wine (Jn. 2. 1-11). The hosts at the wedding, having run out of wine, were about to suffer nothing more than acute social embarrassment; the servants, too, suddenly found themselves in an invidious position. At Mary's promptings, through Jesus' actions, both hosts and servants were spared public humiliation.

Mary's own great prayer, the Magnificat, was for the lowly, the hungry, the downtrodden in society, and their deliverance. What strikes us about the Cana story, is that both Mary and Jesus were willing to go out of their way to protect the wedding hosts and their servants not from something like starvation or persecution, or disease, but from social embarrassment. They were saved from shame among their peers.

When we are in the grip of fear that we will be shamed or embarrassed, perhaps through something silly or careless we have done, perhaps through some vice or addiction we have kept so well-hidden we don't even acknowledge it to ourselves, we are encouraged to turn to Mary for help.

Our individual needs are not minor things in the eyes of God. The fear of social embarrassment, for example, can be crippling, it can hold us back from taking risks, it can block off the joy that God wills for us in the good things of this world.

The story of the marriage feast at Cana provides positive encouragement to us to turn to Mary in our needs. Whatever most deeply concerns us, no matter how seemingly trivial or how desperately serious, we can turn to Mary with confidence, knowing that she will prompt Jesus on our behalf. And so, the Church provides us with that wonderful prayer, usually referred to by its Latin name, the *Memorare*: Remember O most loving Virgin Mary, that never was it known that anyone who fled to your protection, implored your help or sought your intercession, was left unaided.'

When Mary visited Elizabeth, she sang aloud, 'My spirit rejoices in God, my Saviour', and her actions at the Cana wedding feast showed that she wanted that same depth of joy for us. When we turn to Mary, confiding to her whatever the thoughts that grip us, whatever the terrors that hold us in bondage, blocking off our joy, we will not be left unaided.