

THE WORDS OF MARY

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"Just as all mothers are deeply affected when they perceive that the countenance of their children reflects a peculiar likeness to their own, so also our Most Sweet Mother wishes for nothing more, never rejoices more than when she sees those whom, under the cross of her Son, she has adopted as children in his stead, portray the lineaments and ornaments of her own soul in thought, word and deed."¹



IN THESE WORDS, our Holy Father urges Mary's children, who strive to walk on the road of holiness to model themselves on their Mother who, "like a giant hurrying on her way,"² always lived the spiritual life at its fullest.

The conformation of ones actions to those which some other person has performed is what we call imitation. In it the imitator takes on the role of a sculptor, forming and shaping himself according to a model. Now it is a fact of common knowledge that a true sculptor goes to great pains to acquaint himself with his subject. The subject's manner of life, his actions, all those little things that go together and make up his personality are carefully investigated. The same care is exercised in any imitative process. The forming of a life to the likeness of another requires a thorough, penetrating study of the model. Thus, this principle seems to be a true one: to the degree that the imitator has made the ideal his own by meditation, to the same degree will his mind be able to direct the reproduction of the actions of the model in his own life.

There is so little about Mary in the Scriptures that it seems as if the Holy Spirit has deliberately withheld almost all the external events of her earthly existence from her children, in order that they might contemplate at length the richness of her interior life. The Gospel does, however, record her words on four occasions—Annunciation, Visitation, Reunion in the Temple, and the Marriage Feast of Cana. These words chart out the way Mary's children are to walk in each of the threefold relationships which makes up the life of a

¹ *Fulgens Corona*, Pius XII, Sept. 8, 1953, n. 24

² cf. Psalm 18, v. 6

human being: relation of man to God, relation of man to himself and relation of man to his neighbor.

AMEN—SO BE IT

(Luke 1, 26, 38)

Be it done to me according to thy word—In the year 4 B.C. “the angel Gabriel was sent from God to a town of Galilee called Nazareth, to a virgin betrothed to a man named Joseph, of the house of David, and the virgin’s name was Mary.” The young maiden was praying, absorbed in the things of God, when suddenly she became aware that someone was in the room with her. “Hail, full of grace, the Lord is with thee”—the greatest and the truest compliment that any human has ever received. “When she had heard him she was troubled at his word, and kept pondering what manner of greeting this might be.” Mary was not troubled at seeing the angel. The sole cause of her perplexity was her amazement on hearing herself addressed by such a title as “full of grace,” for it means “most highly favored by God.” The humble soul is always startled on hearing itself praised.

“Do not be afraid, Mary, for thou has found grace with God.” Gabriel, seeing that Mary’s silence reflected her perplexity, attempts to lessen it by using her own name and assuring her that she is the “beloved of God.”³ The stage is now set. History has reached the “fullness of time.”⁴

“Behold, thou shalt conceive in thy womb and shalt bring forth a son; and thou shalt call his name Jesus. He shall be great, and shall be called the son of the Most High; and the Lord God will give him the throne of David his father, and he shall be king over the house of Jacob forever; and of his kingdom there shall be no end.”

Gabriel’s language is clear enough. She is going to become the mother of the promised Redeemer. Yet there is a difficulty—her vow of virginity. And since God asks from His creatures a reasonable service, Mary asks, “*How shall this happen, since I do not know man?*” The purpose of her vow is to give pleasure to God; she will not try to keep it against His will. “The Holy Spirit shall come upon thee and the power of the Most High shall overshadow thee; and therefore the Holy One to be born shall be called the Son of God.”

³ Marian Year Prayer

⁴ Gal. 4, 4.

The child is to have no human father. Now all that remains is for Mary to give her consent to this mystery. "*Behold the handmaid of the Lord; be it done to me according to thy word.*"

This "fiat," this "Amen" is a model of a creature's relationship to its creator. It is a total surrender to the Will of God, the quiet willing by Mary to make God's will her own. It was nothing new for her. She had spent the fifteen years of her life performing the duty of each moment without reserve. So now when God asks for her flesh and blood, her answer was simple and immediate; her submission was unconditional. And since, as St. Thomas tells us,⁵ her "Amen" was for the entire human race; it remains for each one of her children to echo it in their own lives.

They are to surrender their humanity, their flesh and blood, their hands and feet to God, so that her Son might live in them. Her "fiat," her "Amen" was for herself and for her children, yet God's Will will not be completed in them without their consent. So the Church strives to inculcate this abandonment to God's good pleasure in Mary's children by ending each of her prayers with "Amen," that is to say "So Be It."

ALLELUIA—"PRAISED BE GOD"

(Luke 1, 39, 56)

Magnificat—"And Elizabeth was filled with the Holy Spirit and cried out with a loud voice, saying, 'Blessed art thou among women and blessed is the fruit of thy womb!' . . . And Mary said, '*My soul magnifies the Lord and my spirit rejoices in God my saviour!*'" The virgin finds nothing in herself worthy of Elizabeth's praise; she rejoices "*because He has regarded the lowliness of His handmaid.*" In His unfathomable Goodness God has chosen her, an unknown maiden, to be the Mother of His Son. "*For, behold, all generations will call me blessed;*"—a prophecy that has been fulfilled in the course of centuries and especially in this century, the Age of Mary. Why is she blessed? "*Because He who is mighty has done great things for me;*" in allowing her to conceive the Messiah, yet she remains ever a virgin; "*and holy is his name.*" More, He is Holiness and it is fitting that His Mother should be able to respond to Bernadette's request for her name by answering, "*I am the Immaculate Conception.*"⁶

"*And his mercy is from generation to generation on those who fear him.*"—that is to say those who serve Him as true children. Her

⁵ *Summa* III, 30, a. 1.

⁶ cf. *Fulgens Corona*, n. 3.

own holiness is only the first effect of the Incarnation. Until time passes into eternity thousands of saints will be the fruit of her spiritual womb. For St. Augustine tells us that the blessed travel through this world enclosed in Mary's womb and see light only when they are brought forth in the Beatific Vision. *He has shown might in His arm, He has scattered the proud in the conceit of their heart. He has put down the mighty from their thrones and has exalted the lowly. He has filled the hungry with good things, and the rich he has sent away empty.* These children of the Mother of God will not be the proud who have set themselves upon the thrones of self-reliance and placed their confidence in worldly riches; her children, like herself, will acknowledge their helplessness and seek the treasures of grace alone. As a result, they will be exalted and raised to the life of the Divine King, a life of spending His riches forever.

Mary's song finishes on the same note with which it began, a note of thanksgiving. *"He has given help to Israel his servant, mindful of mercy—Even as he spoke to our fathers—to Abraham and to his posterity forever."* In her, a daughter of David, a child of Abraham, has been fulfilled the promise which had been given to the ancient patriarch, the spiritual father of all those who are sanctified by faith in her Son.⁷

Thus ends Mary's answer to Elizabeth's congratulations and praise. It is the canticle of a Jewish maid whose mind has been completely formed by Holy Scripture. It contains no original images, there is no evidence of poetic genius. Yet, these common Jewish expressions passing through her soul take on her quiet restraint and sing of the selfless humility of one whose only wish is to magnify the Lord. Her noble soul suffered on hearing herself praised, took refuge in her own nothingness and broke forth in a torrent of gratitude, in an exultant "Alleluia."

Mary's "Alleluia" is daily put on the lips of her children in Vespers of the Divine Office. Thus, it takes a continual part in fulfilling the obligation that man has to praise the Most Blessed Trinity through, with and in her Divine Son. Not that the praise of a million worlds could increase the glory and the happiness that the unending activity of the Holy Trinity renders itself. It is perfect. God, however, has willed to give man the opportunity of entering into this perfect harmony of praise. He is to merit heaven by beginning on earth to live heaven's very life, the glorification of God. And in saying the Magnificat, Mary's children are allowed to enter into the deepest

⁷ cf. Heb. 11, 17; Jas. 2, 21.

sentiments of their Mother, the Blessed Trinity's masterpiece. They use her words to magnify their Lord for their existence and rejoice in her Son, their Saviour.

MATERNAL HEART

(Luke 2, 41, 52)

"*Son, why hast thou done so to us?*" Thus far Mary's words, her "Alleluia" and her "Amen," have shown that she has a heart empty of self, a heart of fire for God. At the temple and at Cana they tell us of her maternal heart.

"And his parents were wont to go every year to Jerusalem at the Feast of the Passover. And when he was twelve years old, they went up to Jerusalem according to the custom of the feast." The following year Jesus would become a "son of the Law" and one of the legal obligations was to visit the temple three times each year. So Mary and Joseph, as pious Jewish parents, decided to anticipate this obligation and familiarize Jesus with His duties before they began. "And after they had fulfilled the days, when they were returning, the boy Jesus remained in Jerusalem, and his parents did not know it." The mystery begins. Jesus of His own accord "remained" in the Holy City. "But thinking that he was in the caravan, they had come a day's journey before it occurred to them to look for him among their relatives and acquaintances." To the Western mind the parents' leaving a boy of twelve in a great city seems to be gross carelessness; to the Oriental it was a very natural thing. For in the East the children mature early and at twelve are well able to care for themselves. It also shows that Jesus, although the eternal Son of God, is a "Son of Man," a Son of Mary. Reaching young manhood, He acts as any normal youth.

"And not finding him" when the caravan had stopped for the night, early the next morning "they returned to Jerusalem in search for him. And it came to pass after three days, they found him in the temple." Mary, all mother, speaks, "*Son, why hast thou done so to us? Behold, in sorrow thy father and I have been seeking thee.*" She, His Mother, wanted to know why her Son caused them such anxiety; her maternal heart freed from the weight of unexplained separation, administers her Son a gentle rebuke. Note that Mary says "*thy father and I.*" The sequence of these words point out the profoundness of Mary's love for her husband. So complete was the surrender of her heart to him that, even at this moment, her own sorrow takes second place.

The Fathers tell us that her Son answers His Mother with an

affectionate smile. "How is it that you sought me? Did you not know that I must be about my Father's business?" And according to the ancient commentators the sense of the last question is "where do you expect to find me except in my Father's house?" Jesus passes over the first question of His Mother. Why He remained in Jerusalem is one of the mysteries that God will answer in eternity. Mary's lot, like ours, was to live in the darkness of Faith.

This scene verifies the principle that grace does not destroy human nature but rather perfects it. The whole character of a woman is ordained by God to motherhood, physical or spiritual: her body, her soul, her powers of understanding, her capacity for suffering, her inexhaustible devotion, all these are imperfect unless they are raised to the supernatural. Mary's maternal nature is raised to the supernatural as Mother of God and Mother of mankind. She is the perfect Mother, all mother.

NEIGHBOR—OTHER SELF

(John 2, 1, 11)

"They have no wine."—Since the Gospel is silent concerning the hidden years in Nazareth, there is a tendency to isolate the Holy Family from their true environment. Concentrating on a mistaken notion of holiness, we would like to remove from their lives the necessity of daily toil, spare them the trials and difficulties of human existence and place them in a sort of heaven. This would not be a true picture of their lives, of their holiness. Mary, like her women neighbors, prepared meals, washed dishes, swept the house, did the family wash at the public fountain, ground wheat for bread and kept the family in clothes whose thread was spun by her own hands. She looked forward to the gaily and chatting about the village trough, to the short walk on the afternoon of the Sabbath and to an occasional visit with her neighbors. In short, she was simply the wife of Joseph, the carpenter.

About six months after Jesus had left Nazareth to preach the "good news" of the coming of the reign of God, "a marriage took place at Cana of Galilee, and the mother of Jesus was there." Mary, a close friend of the newly-wed couple, walked the eight miles to Cana, and added her joyful presence to the glad occasion. "Now Jesus too was invited to the marriage, and also his disciples." When the host heard that Jesus had returned from Bethany where John had been baptizing, he urged Him and His newly won companions to join in the celebration.

During the course of the banquet, Mary noticed that the wine

was running short and soon her host would be embarrassed. But he was a friend. She makes the imminent shortage *her own*. Yet it would not be proper for her, an invited guest, to take notice of the predicament. She turns discreetly to her Son who is seated near her and quietly says, "*They have no wine.*" It is a model prayer of petition. Our Lady simply lays bare the pressing need, confident He shares her love for the host. And Jesus says "What wouldst thou have me do, woman? My hour has not yet come." Jesus knows that His Mother is implicitly asking for a miracle. So he addresses her with the title "woman" (in Hebrew usage it is a word expressive of honor) in order to give a character of solemnity to his statement. His intention was not to appear on the scene before the Baptist finished his mission and in her request His Mother asked Him to reveal Himself before He had planned.

To us this answer of Jesus seems to be a refusal, but Mary knows her Son. His Mother reads His face and understands that He has changed His mind for her. He will allow her to present Him to the World. She whispers to the servant, "*Whatsoever He shall say to you, do you.*" Pius XII, gives us a commentary on Mary's royal command.

"And it seems to Us that the Blessed Virgin who throughout the whole course of her life . . . never departed from the precepts and *example* of her own Divine Son, it seems to us, We say, that she repeats to each of us those words, with which she addressed the servers at the wedding feast of Cana, pointing as it were to Jesus Christ: 'Whatsoever He shall say to you, do you.'"

"This same exhortation, understood, of course, in a wider sense, she seems to repeat to us all today, when it is evident that the root of all evils by which men are harshly and violently afflicted and peoples and nations straitened, has its origin in this especially, that many people have forsaken Him 'the fountain of living water and have dug for themselves cisterns, broken cisterns, that can hold no water' (Jer. 2, 13). They have forsaken Him, Who is the 'Way, the Truth and the Life' (John 14, 6). . . . This is what she teaches us; to this the Blessed Virgin Mary exhorts us, our Most Sweet Mother, who, with true charity, loves us more than any earthly mother."⁸

⁸ *Fulgens Corona*, n. 25.

AMEN—ALLELUIA, MOTHER

Mary's "Amen," "Alleluia" spoken from a maternal heart do not prescribe a set of abstract norms according to which her children are to govern their lives; they present a living model for them to pattern their actions in their day to day relationship with God, themselves and their fellowmen.

God—At the Annunciation Mary, in giving her "Amen" so that the Holy Spirit might be able to begin the redeeming Incarnation within her womb, calls herself "handmaid of the Lord." It is better translated as "slavegirl of the Lord" with all that "slave" means to the modern mind, which prizes freedom above all other perfections. Mary says in effect behold one who is totally given up to God in a bondage of love, completely and wholly His to be used as He sees fit.

Self—The "Magnificat" tells of a soul that has experiential knowledge of the terrible truth, God is and she is not, that rejoices in this knowledge and arise from the tomb of her own emptiness with a grateful "Alleluia." For God has chosen to make her nothingness fruitful with Life, Life Itself. And through her, the Blessed, all mankind will receive this Life.

Neighbor—When God chooses people for some special work, He prepares their soul and body, and equips them with the necessary qualities to fulfill their vocation. Mary was chosen to be the Mother of God and of men. Her soul was prepared for this office by her Immaculate Conception; her body was consecrated by her virginity. The result was that she possessed all the natural and supernatural perfections, all the graces that she needed to be the perfect mother, all mother. Her truly maternal rebuke at the Temple shows the warm, tender relation that existed between Mary and the Divine Son; with a mother's solicitude she makes her neighbor's shortage of wine *her own*, certainly a trifling in itself, and asks for a miracle. Her children know that she has not lost any of her interest in the seemingly little things of human living in her role as the "Omnipotent Suppliant" in heaven.