

MARY, WOMAN OF COURAGE

by Mary Ann Molinari, "Centre" Talk given May 28, 2017
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Prayer to begin Hail full of grace, we welcome you in our midst. Come with your Spouse the Holy Spirit to teach us, to encourage us, and to lead us to your Son. This we ask in the name of Jesus. Amen

Tonight we will reflect on the life of a most courageous woman, whom we know and cherish as our loving Mother, Mary. We will focus on the gospels of St Luke and St John for our inspiration.

1. Mary in Gospel of St Luke (Lk 1 and 2)

We first turn to the Gospel of St Luke to the Annunciation in which the angel Gabriel comes to Mary, a young virgin living in Nazareth. The unexpected guest graciously greets Mary saying, "*Hail full of grace, the Lord is with you. Blessed are you among women.*" Another translation will say, "*Rejoice, full of grace.*"

God has given His chosen one a special name, "full of grace". This means that Mary is highly favoured with the fullness of God's life dwelling within her being. The source of her fullness of grace is God Himself who is full of grace and dispenser of grace through Jesus the mediator. "Grace is God leaning forward and stooping toward man." ¹

God stoops toward Mary and toward us. What incredible graciousness!

What an unusual greeting Mary received from the angel. The prophet Zephaniah had used similar language when prophesying the advent of salvation.

We read, "*Sing aloud, O daughter Zion; shout, O Israel! Rejoice and exult with all your heart, O daughter Jerusalem! The Lord has taken away the judgments against you, he has turned away your enemies. The King of Israel, the Lord, is in your midst.*" (Zep 3.14-15)

"In fact, whether or not Mary realized it at that moment, she was the daughter Zion, the daughter Jerusalem told to rejoice at the coming of the Saviour in the midst of her womb." ²

Gabriel invited Mary to rejoice, "The whole of salvation history, in some sense the entire history of the world, has led up to this greeting." ³ Blessed is she among women.

In the light of this visitation, it is understood that Mary experienced awe, trepidation and sought understanding. She experienced openness. She believed and cautiously trusted.

The angel set her at ease saying, "*Fear not Mary. You have found favour with God.*" What reassuring and wonderful words to embrace.

The angel continued, "*You will conceive and bear a son and give him the name Jesus.*"

*Great will be his dignity and he will be called Son of the Most High.
The Lord will give him the throne of David his father.
He will rule over the house of Jacob forever, and his reign will be without
end.”*

This language tells her Gabriel is speaking about the Messiah the Jewish people are waiting for. She knew the Jewish scriptures and cherished them.

Mary questions how this could possibly come about. She is told the Holy Spirit will overshadow her, and her child to be born will be the Son of God.

The word “overshadow” stands out. In the Old (Jewish) Testament did not a cloud, the Shekinah of the Lord, overshadow the Ark of the Covenant as the people were guided by God on the journey to the promised land? Was she to become the Ark that would carry the Messiah in her heart and flesh? What surprising words she was hearing! What powerful words! What welcome words!

To this request she answered, *“I am the servant of the Lord. May it be done to me as you say.”*

Mary believed! Through her belief, followed by her yes, she conceived of the Holy Spirit. Her puzzlement at Gabriel's words did not lead to doubt, but to wonder how God would bring his message to fulfillment. Mary surrendered her will to God, not knowing the future but trusting totally in God's love and plan for her. She is the humble servant of the Lord who conceived the Messiah in her heart before she conceived Him in her womb.

St Teresa of Avila tells us, “Humility drew the King from heaven to the womb of the Virgin, and with it, by one hair, will draw Him to our souls.”⁴

St John Paul II sees Mary's fiat as the beginning of a journey of faith.

“Mary will be required to exhibit total trust in God, which means to abandon oneself to the living God and the mystery of His will. Mary's faith will be tested over and over again.”⁵

Through this account we see in Mary a woman of humility, of openness, of belief, of trust and of total surrender of self to the will of God. She is a woman of courage.

The visitation to Elizabeth follows. Both women share the joy, the surprise of God's work of creation in them. Mary's response to Elizabeth's greeting is a song of praise, her Magnificat.

She proclaims the greatness of the Lord who has blessed her abundantly, not because of her greatness or goodness, but because He has looked upon His servant in her lowliness.

She shows true humility, thanking and praising God for the blessings and favours. He has lavished on her out of His holiness. Her blessings exploded in the Magnificat, a hymn giving glory to God.

“As she burst into praise, she foreshadowed the universal Pentecostal praise of the early community in Acts 2. She did in person what the Church would do as a community.”⁶

Mary’s faith is rooted in her understanding of the Old Testament. According to Fr Cantalamessa:

Mary believed in the God of the Old Testament, the God of her people. She saw in the God who revealed Himself to her, the God of the promises, the God of Abraham, and his descendants. She humbly felt part of the host of believers, and became the first believer of the new covenant. The Magnificat is full of this faith based on Scripture and of references to the history of her people.”⁷

Elizabeth affirms Mary’s calling.

*“Blessed are you among women and blessed is the fruit of your womb.
But who am I that the mother of my Lord should come to me?
Blessed is she who trusted the Lord’s words.”*

Elizabeth, inspired by the Holy Spirit, recognizes Mary as the mother of her Lord. She also recognizes that Mary believed the angel as opposed to Zechariah who did not trust the angel at the time of his visitation.

Elizabeth, in her greeting, professes Mary’s new role to be the Queen Mother. In the Jewish Scriptures, the queen mother reigned with the king not the wife. Since the king had many wives and only one mother, she was the constant feminine figure who stood at his right hand. The queen mother held much respect and influence. “The king relied on her to be His chief counsellor.”⁸

Mary is now the new Eve who will take her place as Queen Mother. She will be the faithful mother to her son and lord, as she stands beside Him and intercede for us.

“Woman of silence, given to listening, docile in the hands of the Father, the Virgin Mary is invoked or ‘blessed’ by all generations, for she recognized the marvels accomplished in her by the Holy Spirit.”⁹

We certainly can respond to this great honour by seeking the intercession of a woman who believed and had the courage to keep repeating her fiat.

Mary, Queen Mother, hold us in your love and lead us to your Son Jesus.

The Nativity arrives. Very late in her pregnancy, Mary with Joseph journeyed along bumpy, dusty roads to the city of David, Joseph’s ancestral home. No doubt, they were exhausted, frantic to find lodging, and had to settle into a cold animal shelter. There she had her Son and loved Him with all her heart. In this poor cold setting, she no doubt wondered about the words of Gabriel. Why all this difficulty and suffering? This Son of God was born unnoticed by Jewish and influential leaders. He was born silently, in poverty and mystery. Mary, supported by Joseph, pondered God’s ways - so different from the ways of her world.

Shepherds, in their fields were blessed to hear a joyful chorus of angels awakening in them the desire to find the location of the holy family. They came in haste. No one was too little. God Himself descended and,

“placed Himself at the base to take into Himself everything and everyone, God silently entered the womb of a woman. What a contrast to the god of the philosophers, what a comedown for human pride and what an invitation to humility.”

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This virtue of humility seems unrecognized and unappreciated today. Yet, God places so much importance and value on it.

St Teresa tells us,

"One day I was pondering why our Lord was so fond of this virtue of humility. This thought came to me suddenly: it is because God is supreme truth; and to be humble is to walk in truth, for it is a very deep truth that of ourselves we have nothing good but only misery and nothingness." 11

Jesus, in His ministry clearly stated, *“I am the way, the truth and the life.”* (Jn 14.6)

He is the humble one, yet the mighty Lord. His mother, like Him is the humble servant of the Lord.

Mother, of contemplation and humility teach us to walk in the way of the truth. Mother model of humility and courage, pray for us.

The Presentation: Mary was obedient to the Law of Moses in presenting Jesus at the temple and in fulfilling the requirement for her purification. While they were at the temple, Simeon, a devout and holy Jew, led by the Holy Spirit approached them. He took the Child into his arms, blessed God and prayed the Benedictus. He told the parents this Child was God’s salvation and a light of revelation to the gentiles. Mary and Joseph were amazed at what they heard. Then Simeon continued with words that were much more ominous.

To Mary he said,

“This child is destined for the falling and the rising of many in Israel, and to be a sign that will be opposed so that the inner thoughts of many will be revealed – and a sword will pierce your own soul too.” (Lk 2.34-35)

What seemed like a brilliant future expressed by Gabriel at the Annunciation now was sounding disturbingly like turmoil, opposition and suffering.

St John Paul II understands Simeon's words as a second Annunciation.

“These words tell her of the actual historical situation in which the Son is to accomplish His mission, namely in misunderstanding and sorrow ...(this announcement) also reveals to her that she will have to live her obedience of faith in suffering, at the side of the suffering Saviour, and that her motherhood will be mysterious and sorrowful.” 12

Mary realizes if a sword will pierce her heart, in some sense the sword will also pierce the heart of Jesus. Think how deeply this revelation would affect Mary, how she would ponder all the aspects of Simeon's words. The prophetess Anna also in the temple at the time gave thanks to God and talked about the child to all who looked forward to the deliverance of Jerusalem. (Lk 2.38)

The prophecies of Simeon and Anna are astounding, dizzying and full of meaning for Mary and Joseph to ponder. In the face of the difficulties ahead, Mary remained faithful, a courageous daughter of the Father.

The Finding in the Temple: The gospel of Luke leads us in the desperate search of Mary and Joseph to find Jesus, who was missing on their return journey from Jerusalem to Nazareth. They had celebrated the Passover, and had travelled a full day, when they had to return to Jerusalem. Anxious and fearful for Jesus' safety, they no doubt prayed all the way back.

They finally found Him after three long days, in the midst of the teachers at the Temple. He was listening to them and asking questions. Observing Him, they were amazed at his engagement with the teachers. Mary with great concern asked,
*"Son why have you done this to us?
Your father and I have been searching for you in sorrow."*

That is a reasonable question. His response seems to be that of a normal teenager.
"Why did you search for Me?" And, with all seriousness he says,
"Did you not know I had to be in My Father's house?"

Mary and Joseph did not understand! What was meant by being in my Father's house?

Through this incident, Mary was already being challenged as a parent to start to let go of her Son.

It is always a challenge for parents to let go of their children. Mary sought to understand again. She pondered Jesus' words in her heart. She was discovering the meaning of Simeon's words at the presentation of Jesus in the temple: a sword will pass through your own soul. (Lk 2.35)

"She is learning that Jesus puts His relationship to His Father over family ties." ¹³

This is part of His mission. We have someone in Mary who understands when we struggle to let go and surrender to God our children, or our health, or the loss of a loved one. Mary, mother of courage help us in the task of letting go, of surrendering.

2. MARY Woman of Courage in the Gospel of St. John

The Wedding at Cana. The scene is a wedding celebration almost in crisis. Jesus had not performed any public miracles when Mary informed Him the wine was running out. Mary placed her faith in Jesus to do something. Jesus responds,

*"Woman, how does this concern of yours involve me?
My hour has not yet come."*

The words “*woman*” and “*hour*” stand out. In John’s gospel, the term woman goes back to the garden in Genesis 3 where Eve, the first woman, and the mother of mankind sins. The hour refers to the hour of glory, the time when Jesus will offer Himself for our salvation on the cross. Jesus knows that by performing a miracle He will initiate the beginning of His ministry which the Father has assigned to Him.

“This will begin His march toward the hour of His passion. If He does that, Mary will assume a new role. Mary will become the “woman” in Genesis 3.15 the one whose Son will defeat the devil.”¹⁴

As the new Eve she will become mother of the people of God.

Mary, on the other hand, is simply concerned with helping. She does not ask Him for a miracle. She merely informs Him they have no wine. The decision she leaves to His choice. Pope Benedict XVI reminds us of Mary's fiat. At Nazareth Mary surrendered her will to the Will of God, and she continued daily in that attitude.

“This is how she teaches us to pray: not by seeking to assert before God our own will and our desires however important they may be , however reasonable they might appear to us, but rather to bring them before Him and let Him decide what he intends to do. From Mary, we learn graciousness and readiness to help. But we also learn humility and generosity in accepting God's Will, in the confident conviction that, whatever it may be, it will be our, and my own, true good.”¹⁵

Mary simply says to the stewards, “*Do whatever he tells you.*” (Jn 2.5)

Jesus asked the stewards to fill the six large jars with water. The crisis was averted when Jesus performed His first miracle changing the water to a fine quality wine. His ministry was launched. His disciples believed in Him. From the very beginning, mother and Son worked together, under the Father's plan of salvation.

In this incident we see Mary, the woman of faith, encouraging her Son to be about the Father’s business. He would now leave home to announce the Good News, to teach and to heal. He would also be the recipient of criticism, misunderstanding, mockery, anger and much suffering.

Another important dimension in the example of the wedding feast is the role Mary fulfilled as intercessor. Mary was sensitive to the anxiety of the young couple who needed help. She came to Jesus, the One who could help. St Thérèse, the beautiful teacher of the Little Way, had a great love for Our Lady, and sought her intercession throughout her entire life. She wrote,

“The Blessed Virgin made me feel it was really herself who smiled on me and brought about my cure. I understood she was watching over me, that I was her child. I could no longer give her any other name but mama. I begged her to protect me always.”¹⁶

Our Lady answered that request up to Therese's dying days when the statue of the Virgin of the Smile accompanied her in the infirmary. St Thérèse took Our Lady as her model intercessor, leading her to become a powerful intercessor for many, many people, even to this day.

As Carmelites, we too are called to respond to the needs of others through intercessory prayer. We share an intercessory ministry at the heart of the Church with Mary our mother, with Jesus the perfect intercessor, and with the Holy Spirit before the Father.

Daily, we come to our Mother Mary for her intercession, when among the many Marian prayers we pray the Hail Mary, or recite the Memorare. We place our families, our friends, our Church our Carmelite family, and the world into her loving care. We remember the motto of St John Paul II, "Totus Tuus". As sons and daughters in Our Lady's Carmel we too echo the words, "Totus Tuus."

Mary, encountering the Hour of Suffering and Glory. In the account of the Passion, I would like to reflect with you on the suffering Mother. The time prophesied by Simeon had arrived. Imagine the mother's worst nightmare unfolding; Jesus was arrested. What emotions she must have felt. Only good accompanied Jesus' ministry. She supported Him as he taught of God's love - the kingdom of God, healed the sick and raised the dead. He was on trial because He spoke the truth and said He was God's Son. The establishment, chief priests and Pharisees, threatened by Him, wanted to get rid of Him. The little people who praised Him on Palm Sunday were not heard.

Jesus stands before Pilate, bound as a criminal. Mary hears the false accusations, lies and shouts of the unruly crowd. With alarm she hears, to her horror, Pilate order scourging for Jesus. She watches Jesus being led to the pillar. When Jesus comes before Pilate a second time she sees her suffering Son with torn flesh and bleeding from a crown of thorns. She is numb. She hears the crowd choose to free Barabbas over Jesus. What an unbearable feeling! What inner pain!

The climb to Calvary begins. The guards beat Him, humiliate Him, spit on Him. Mary suffers with Jesus through all of this. What can she do? She would want so much to relieve some of His agony of body, mind and soul. She can only give the odd glance of love as He moved, burdened under the cross of our salvation.

All around she hears mockeries, the shouts of guards and the sounds of hammers on nails and the cry of agony from her beloved Son. She stands with some women and John, near the cross.

A SWORD HAS INDEED PIERCED HER SOUL!

Mary at the Cross At the cross we meet the woman of superabundant courage. The hour Jesus alluded to at Cana was being fulfilled. It was the time for the Son of Man to be glorified. (Jn 12.23)

Mary had accompanied Jesus in His passion, and now she stood faithful, silent, broken-hearted, supporting her dying Son. She was courageously pondering the mystery she was involved in.

This humiliating and excruciating death seemed so detached from the greeting of the Annunciation. Yet she clung to the words of Jesus, that He would be killed and on the third day will rise again.

She was the woman of faith, trusting in God and surrendering her will in this dark hour. She was also the woman of hope believing in God's promise of the Resurrection. Her hope was based on the solid foundation of God's faithfulness to His promises. In her devastating pain she held on to hope. What a model she is for us! God is faithful to His promises to her, and to us also.

While she was standing at the foot of the cross, Jesus looked at her and found strength, through her faithfulness to carry His mission to completion.

"Betrayed by one disciple, denied by another, abandoned by all the disciples except John, Jesus found strength in his mother's eyes. Knights used to fight battles for their ladies.

Jesus fought to the end for Mary. He was paying the price for her Immaculate Conception, the first of the redeemed, and after her, the rest of us." 17

While she looked at Him, He looked at her. It was a deep communication of love, and pain.

Before Jesus died he committed His greatest treasure, His mother, to the care and protection of the disciple John saying, "*Woman, here is your son.*" To John, He said, "*Here is your mother.*"

At the foot of the cross, John represents the disciples and all generations of believers.

What wonderful news because it encompasses each one of us. Jesus also hands over the care of His legacy, the Church, to His mother. She assumes His earthly treasure as the spiritual mother of the Church. Jesus gave her, the woman of the Scriptures and the new Eve, a unique mission.

It started at the cross, and dynamically exploded with the coming of the Holy Spirit on the apostles at Pentecost. Her role of intercession continued throughout history.

At the cross, Mary was equipped for her new ministry by remaining the faithful servant of the Lord, following Jesus to the end. She heard Jesus ask the Father to forgive His executioners. Following her Son and her Lord, she also chooses to forgive. Mary faithfully continued to say "YES" throughout her entire life. She has been prepared to be mother at the heart of the Church, and holy mother of mankind.

Before she could exercise her new mission Jesus had to come to her to heal her wounded heart. St Teresa in *The Spiritual Testimonies*, writes of a time after receiving Communion when the Lord favoured her with knowledge of His mother's suffering at the time of His great Passion.

"Immediately after His Resurrection, he went to see our Lady because she was in great need, and that the pain she experienced so absorbed and transpierced her soul, that she did not return immediately to herself to rejoice in that joy.

He remained a long time with her because it was necessary in order to console her." 18

Mary, model of great courage, we honour you.

Now, in glory in heaven, she intercedes for her family as the Queen Mother bringing her children to her Son. The catechism teaches,

“The Immaculate Virgin preserved free from all stain of Original Sin, when the course to her Son, the Lord of lords and conqueror of sin and death. The Assumption of the Blessed Virgin is a singular participation in her Son's Resurrection, and in anticipation of the resurrection of other Christians.”¹⁹

In Mary, we find hope for today and tomorrow. Her contemplative life, lived in union with Jesus, is a perfect model for us. She provides a sure path to eternal life. Like Mary, we will need courage in the challenges of daily life to reach our goal of glory in heaven. We place our hand in Mary's and ask her to intercede for us now and at the hour of our death.

“Mary was the first cloistered woman in the Church. Her life *‘is hidden with Christ in God.’*” (Col 3.3)

Mary opened the way to the second calling in the Church, the hidden vocation of prayer, side by side with the apostolic and active vocation. Mary is the prototype of the praying Church.”²⁰

Our Constitutions 1.4 reads, “Mary is the one who preserved in her heart the life and actions of her Son and meditated upon them, providing for us an example of contemplation.”

God has blessed each one of us. St Teresa encourages us to, “imitate in some way the great humility of the Blessed Virgin Mary whose habit we wear.”²¹

With grateful hearts may we grow in our vocation. May the joy of the Lord be our strength.

Mary, woman of contemplation, journey with us.

Lastly, we turn our attention to the Book of Revelation. John was given a heavenly vision for the Church.

*“A great portent appeared in heaven; a woman clothed with the sun,
with the moon under her feet, and on her head a crown of twelve stars.”* (Rev 12.1)

Who is this woman? She is Mary, the mother of the Messiah. She is the one who carried within her body Jesus the Lord, Jesus the Bread of Life, Jesus the High Priest.

Where else in Scripture do we find the Word of God, the manna - bread in the desert, and the priestly rod of Aaron together in one place? Was it not in the ark of the covenant? God's presence in the ark overshadowed by the glory cloud accompanied the Jewish people on their journey in the desert.

Where is the ark today?

In 587 BC at the time of the Babylonian invasion and destruction of the temple, the prophet Jeremiah hid the ark in a cave in an attempt to preserve it.

The story of Maccabees follows. Jeremiah placed the tent, the ark and the altar of incense in the cave. Then he sealed the entrance. Later some of the people came in search of the cave but they could not find it. When Jeremiah heard of this he rebuked them and declared:

“The place shall remain unknown until God gathers His people together again and shows his mercy. Then the Lord will disclose these things and the glory of the cloud will appear.” (2 Mc 2.5-8)

God’s presence in the ark continues to be present in the Church, in Mary, mother of the Church and our mother. She is the New Eve and the perfect Ark of the Covenant.

“What John saw in the heavenly temple was far greater than the ark of the old covenant - the ark that had radiated the glory cloud before the menorah at the heart of the temple of ancient Israel. John saw the ark of the new covenant, the vessel chosen to bear God's covenant into the world once and for all.”²²

We have journeyed with Mary from the time of the Annunciation through the challenges, joys and sufferings of her life to the glory of her Queenship. Today, she continues to care and intercede for all her children. She is the woman of courage who fought the good fight and won the crown of glory. How blessed we are to be the children of such a mother.

Thank you Jesus for sharing your mother with us.

Mary, woman of belief - help us to trust.

Mary, woman of hope - help us to surrender.

Mary, woman of charity - help us to love.

Mary, woman of glory - intercede for us.

Mary, woman of courage - thank you.

Our Lady of Mount Carmel - we place our hand in yours.

Mother, lead us to the embrace of your Son Jesus, the Son of God.

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