

ON THE FEAST OF THE ASSUMPTION – A Reflection on Mary

“Behold the handmaid of the Lord”



Mary of Nazareth

Mary, a young Galilean woman of Nazareth, was betrothed to a carpenter named Joseph. One day, according to the Gospel of Luke, she was visited by the angel Gabriel, who greeted her with the words, "Hail, O favoured one, the Lord is with you!" After calming her fears he announced that she would conceive and bear a son named Jesus, who would be called "the Son of the Most High."

Mary was troubled by this news, for she was as yet unmarried. If she were charged with adultery she could be stoned to death. But the angel told her that she would conceive by the power of the Holy Spirit. "With God nothing will be impossible," he assured her. And so Mary responded in faith: "Let it be done to me according to your word."

It was in the space created by Mary's faith - and not simply in her womb - that the Word became flesh. For this reason she has been called not only the Mother of Jesus but Mother of the Church. In the past it was common to emphasize the ways in which Mary was set apart from and above all other women and the ordinary conditions of humanity. Today there is a new emphasis on her status as a woman of the people and her solidarity with the rest of humanity. A "Mariology from above" emphasized God's initiative in

selecting Mary for her part in the divine mystery of redemption. In contrast, a "Mariology from below" begins with the poor woman, Mary of Nazareth, who was rooted in the faith and struggles of her people, subject to the cruelties of the world, and heir to the ancient hope for deliverance and salvation. In this light, Mary is not so much honored for her special nature as for her exceptional faith.

Two stories in the Gospels highlight this point. One time Jesus was told that his "mother and brothers" were looking for him. Gazing at those who were seated around him he answered, "Who are my mother and my brothers? These are my mother and my brothers. Whoever does the will of God is brother and sister and mother to me" (Mark 3:33-35). Another time someone called out from a crowd, "Blessed is the womb that bore you and the breasts that nursed you!" To this Jesus responded, "Rather, blessed are they who hear the word of God and keep it" (Luke 11:27-28).

Neither of these stories reflects a disregard on the part of Jesus towards his mother. But they do show that he rejected the claims of blood or natural kinship in favour of discipleship. In this perspective Mary's pre-eminence is due to her having exemplified the spirit of true discipleship: attention, reverence, and obedience to the word and will of God.

The Gospel of John places Mary at the foot of the cross beside "the beloved disciple." According to Luke, she was among the disciples who gathered in the upper room in Jerusalem after Jesus' ascension. She was in effect the first and paradigmatic disciple. She is thus the first to be honoured among the saints. In the darkness of faith, she offered her consent to the mysterious plan of God. In the light of grace, she responded with her extraordinary song of praise and thanksgiving:

*My soul magnifies the Lord,
and my spirit rejoices in God my Saviour,
for he has regarded the lowliness of his handmaiden.
For behold, henceforth all generations will call me blessed;
for he who is mighty has done great things for me,
and holy is his name....*

See: Elizabeth A. Johnson, "Saints and Mary," in Francis Schüssler Fiorenza and John P. Galvin, eds., *Systematic Theology: Roman Catholic Perspectives*, vol. 2 (Minneapolis: Fortress, 1991).

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