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Mary, Our Lady
of Faith:
Mother of the
Church –
‘the first and
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[PART 1]

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Mary, the Mother of Jesus, has two histories within Christian tradition. We have the Mary of popular devotions and the Mary of Scripture.

The *Mary of Devotions* is the Mary we know from her many titles: Our Lady of Lourdes, Our Lady of Knock, Our Lady of Fatima, Mother of perpetual help ...; The Mary whose different titles we recite in litanies, the Mary we know through novenas and prayers. The Mary we sing to with different hymns; She is the Mother who understands human suffering, the Mother we can always turn to, and for many the maternal face of God ... and many others.

Not so well known is the *Mary of Scripture*. The New Testament is the primary source for remembering who Mary is. Here Our Lady’s faith is praised. One title we do not think about too often is that of Mary, Mother of Faith, but that is how scripture, the Word of God, describes her.

MARY AT THE TIME OF THE ANNUNCIATION¹

Our thoughts and images of Mary at the Annunciation have been influenced by renaissance painters, who often portrayed her as in her 20s with European features, in a beautiful setting. Forget those images. The reality was quite different. Mary looked like Jewish and Palestinian women today, unlike renaissance paintings which turned Mary into an upper-class, fair gentlewoman.

Mary was called Miriam, after the sister of Moses. She was young, uneducated, unable to read or write. Mary spoke Aramaic but would have heard Latin from the Roman soldiers, Greek in

1 What follows here is based largely on the following: Robert P. Maloney CM, ‘The Historical Mary’, *America*, Vol. 193 No. 20 and Elizabeth A. Johnson, ‘Mary of Nazareth: Friend of God and Prophet’, *America*, Vol. 182 No. 21.

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commerce and educated circles and Hebrew from the proclamation of the Torah in the synagogue.

She was a Jewish peasant living with her family in Nazareth, a farming village of 400-1600 inhabitants in Roman-occupied Galilee. Mary, with her family, practised their religion at home, following the Torah (Lk 2:22ff), observing the Sabbath and festivals (Lk 2:41), reciting prayers, and attending the village synagogue.

Mary's family lived in an enclosed space of 1 or 2 rooms, stone built, with packed earth floors. These were used for sleep and sex, giving birth and dying, and taking shelter from the elements. Three or four family's 'house spaces' were clustered around a courtyard, all surrounded by an outer stone wall forming a secure living space. In the unroofed common courtyard, the 3-4 families shared an oven, water cistern, and a millstone for grinding grain – this was the kitchen where food was prepared and cooked in the open air. Domestic animals also lived here.

The village shared larger facilities such as a threshing floor, olive and wine presses. They grew their own food, did their own building, sewed their own clothes from cloth they had spun.

Mary was betrothed to Joseph. Betrothed means they were married but not living together yet as man and wife. That happened a year after the betrothal when the bride was brought to the groom's dwelling. Women ordinarily married at about 13 years of age in order to maximize childbearing and also to guarantee their virginity. Mary's betrothal to Joseph (Matt 1:18) and the birth of Jesus occurred when she was very young.

Mary lived in a patriarchal society where women's voices did not count. To understand Mary, look to the lives of poor women today who struggle to live a dignified life against vast odds, in rural and urban settings. Both dwell in poverty due to structural injustices; both inhabit worlds organised around masculine superiority and the inhibition of women's gifts.

MARY IN THE NEW TESTAMENT

1. The Annunciation: Luke 1:26-38

What happened at the Annunciation? We saw what Mary was like at the time of the Annunciation. Keep that in mind as we go through the different texts ... or better still, try to imagine that you are Mary and think what your reactions might be.

The Angel Gabriel tells Mary that she is to conceive and bear a son, whom she will call Jesus. Mary naturally asks how this can come about since she is a virgin.

The angel we are told comes to '*a virgin*'. Luke is indicating

that Mary was a virgin at the time of the conception of Jesus. The stress on the virginal aspect of Mary is placed *before* (not after) the conception of Jesus. The New Testament has nothing to say concerning Mary's virginity after the birth of Jesus. In the New Testament, the virginity of Mary is about the *origins* of Jesus. The whole issue of virginity is to assure that Jesus' origins are from God, and that there was no human intervention in the conception of this child – with the exception of the unique role of Mary.

Mary is told *'The Holy Spirit will come upon you and the power of the Most High will cover you with its shadow. And so the child will be called Son of God.'*

Mary, this young peasant girl, a] *heard* the word of God addressed to her through the angel; b] *asked* questions as to how this would come about as she was a virgin and c] in a tremendous act of faith and trust in God Mary *made* her choice that changed her life, and also ours. *"I am the servant of the Lord, let it be done to me as you have said."*

Mary literally threw herself into God's hands. This was an unbelievable act of trust in God, because she was pregnant, a virgin and she had a fiancé/husband who almost surely would *not* understand. Matthew's Gospel tells us that Joseph was going to divorce Mary, his wife, quietly. *"This is how Jesus Christ came to be born. His mother Mary was betrothed to Joseph; but before they came to live together she was found to be with child through the Holy Spirit. Her husband Joseph, being a man of honour and wanting to spare her publicity, decided to divorce her informally."* (Matthew 1:18-19). Furthermore, she belonged to a family who would fear humiliation and censure, and she lived in a little town that might never stop gossiping.

2. The Visitation: Luke 1:39-45

The Annunciation finishes with the words: *"And the angel left her"* (Lk 1:38) and the next verse tells us that *"Mary set out and went as quickly as she could..."* (1:39). Mary set out at that time and went as quickly as she could ... Why?²

It is easy to imagine that all that was happening in Mary had been kept in her heart until the moment of visiting her cousin. The angel's announcement to her was a very heavy secret to live with, a secret that would be difficult to communicate. Gabriel said *'Nothing is impossible with God'* (Lk 1:37), but God was in heaven, and Mary had to live in her village. Mary needed someone

2 I like the thoughts on the Visitation found both in L. Ellsworth Kalas, *Strong was her faith: Women in the New Testament*, Ch 1 and Cardinal Carlo Maria Martini SJ, *The Gospel Way of Mary. A Journey of Trust and Surrender*. Ch 2.

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who would be there with her now/tomorrow. She needed to meet with Elizabeth. Mary had also a great desire to see her elderly cousin, Elizabeth, to rejoice in her good news and help her.

Notice what happens when Mary arrives. We would understand if Elizabeth began by telling Mary about her ‘miracle’ son. But instead of telling *her* story, Elizabeth turned all her attention on Mary with three blessings: “*Of all women you are the most blessed, and blessed is the fruit of your womb. Why should I be honoured with a visit from the mother of my Lord? For the moment your greeting reached my ears, the child in my womb leapt for joy.*” (Lk 1:41-44) Elizabeth chose to rejoice in Mary’s son. She greeted Mary as ‘*the mother of my Lord*’. Elizabeth knew that Mary was a mother. She accepted Mary, rejoiced for Mary and was honoured by Mary’s visit. And the 3rd blessing: “*Yes, blessed is she who believed that the promise made her by the Lord would be fulfilled.*” She praised Mary’s unbelievable trust in God

With Elizabeth, Mary felt herself understood. She was aware that another person, without any need on her part to explain herself, knew her secret, confirmed it to her, and assured her that she was right to trust. It is almost as though Elizabeth was saying, “Be encouraged. I have understood you. Do not be afraid; You are on the right path.”

Young Mary feels understood, accepted and confirmed in her act of faith and trust at the annunciation and Mary now, in turn, expressed all that she had kept inside because no one would have understood its significance: “*And Mary said: ‘My soul magnifies the Lord...’*”.

3. The Magnificat. Luke 1:46-56

The *Magnificat* is the longest passage put on the lips of any female speaker in the New Testament.

“This is not the gentle, tender, dreamy Mary whom we sometimes see in paintings; this is the passionate, surrendered, proud, enthusiastic Mary who speaks out here. This song ... has none of the sweet, nostalgic, or even playful tones of some of our Christmas carols. It is instead a hard, strong, inexorable song about collapsing thrones and humbled lords of this world, about the power of God and the powerlessness of humankind. These are the tones of the women prophets of the Old Testament that now come to life in Mary’s mouth.”³

3 Dietrich Bonhoeffer, a German pastor and theologian killed by the Nazis, preached these words. Quoted by Elizabeth A. Johnson in her article ‘Mary, Mary quite contrary’, *U.S. Catholic* 2011.

The *Magnificat* falls into two parts: a] vv 46-49, and b] vv 50-56. a] These verses praise God's mercy to Mary, a peasant woman and not among the world's powerful. It is the prayer of a poor woman who proclaims God's greatness. She is young, female, a member of a people subjected to economic exploitation by powerful ruling groups, afflicted by outbreaks of violence. Yet it is to precisely such a woman that the call has come to partner God in the great work of redemption.

"It is not just that God chooses unconventional people for a task, not just that Mary is among the inconsequential poor of the earth, like unlettered women in any poor village on this planet. It is the combination that is revolutionary: God has regarded *her* precisely as a lowly woman. Her favoured status, declared by Gabriel, Elizabeth, and now herself, results from God's surprising and gracious initiative. Rejoicing follows."⁴

b] (vv 50-56) reflects God's victorious deeds and mercy to the oppressed people; the great biblical theme of reversal where lowly groups of people are defended by God while the arrogant end up losers. Think of David and Goliath, (1st Samuel 17:4ff); God's choice of Israel 'If Yahweh set his heart on you and chose you, it was not because you out-numbered other peoples: you were the least of all peoples.' (Deut 7:7); Bernadette of Lourdes, socially, economically, educationally a nobody in 1858 ... and today remembered worldwide; Patrick of Ireland "My name is Patrick. I am a sinner, a simple country person, and the least of all believers. I am looked down upon by many." (Confession of St Patrick). St Paul wrote "*But God chose the foolish things of the world to shame the wise. God chose the weak things of the world to shame the strong. God chose the things of this world that are common and looked down on. God chose things considered unimportant to do away with things considered important.*" (1Cor 1:27-28)

The *Magnificat* is the prayer of the poor of God who rejoice that littleness has been blessed. The proud are toppled from their precious pedestals; the mighty find themselves unemployed; the little people are no longer unimportant; the hungry are attended to at last; the rich awarded nothing.

People in need in every society hear a blessing in this canticle. The battered woman, the single parent without resources, those without food on the table or without even a table, the homeless family, the young abandoned to their own devices, the old who are discarded – all who are subjected to social contempt are encompassed in the hope Mary proclaims.

4 Ibid.

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‘Frequent recitation of Mary’s song and the prevalence of images of Mary as a docile, compliant maiden have dulled us to the power of her words. “They have lost their power to stun and offend.” Not so for Christian base communities and liberation theologians in Latin America, for whom the *Magnificat* has served as a rallying cry for political and social change from the 1980s forward.’⁵

In the 1980s, Guatemala’s government discovered Mary’s words about God’s preferential love for the poor to be too dangerous and revolutionary. Mary’s words were inspiring the Guatemalan poor to believe that change was possible. Their government banned any public recitation of Mary’s words. Similarly, after the Mothers of the Plaza de Mayo (Argentina) – whose children all disappeared during the Dirty War – placed the *Magnificat*’s words on posters throughout the main square, the military junta outlawed any public display of Mary’s song. Oscar Romero drew a comparison between Mary and the poor and powerless people in his own community. During the British rule of India, the *Magnificat* was prohibited from being sung in church Any suggestion that “*He hath put down the mighty from their seat*” might stir up opposition to British rule! And Dietrich Bonhoeffer, a German pastor and theologian who was executed by the Nazis, called the Magnificat “the most passionate, the wildest, one might even say the most revolutionary hymn ever sung.”

Luke’s gospel was written between 85-110 AD when Luke and his communities would have known Mary’s fidelity from the annunciation of the good news to the eve of the coming of the Spirit and birth of the Church. The Magnificat was a hymn circulating in the early Christian communities and Luke inserted it into his Gospel. The hymn and words would have expressed the memories of Mary that the Christian community had.

4. Birth: Luke 2:1-22

From the Annunciation Mary knew that her son was the Messiah ... but she did not know how his birth and future life were going to unfold.

The comments which follow on the birth of Christ speak to me – and hopefully to you also.

“From Appalachia comes a Christmas card with a line drawing of the crèche and a text that reads in part: imagine yourself

5 Barbara E. Reid OP and Shelly Matthews, *Wisdom Commentary Luke 1-9*, 2021. pp 132-133 .

young, inexperienced, pregnant, and poor. You are forced to leave home. On your journey you give birth, but because you have no money you do not receive adequate care or comfort. Right up to the time of delivery you have experienced unjust accusation about your pregnancy, near abandonment by your young husband, and the cruelties of discrimination from society. Now a refugee, you give birth in an unkempt place, a lean-to where animals move about freely. Your name is Ana of Brazil, Debbie of West Virginia, Michelle of Brooklyn, Mary of Nazareth...”⁶

In that region there were shepherds living in the fields, keeping watch over their flock by night... So they went with haste and found Mary and Joseph, and the child lying in the manger. When they saw this, they made known what had been told them about this child; and all who heard it were amazed at what the shepherds told them. But Mary treasured all these words and pondered them in her heart. The shepherds returned, glorifying and praising God for all they had heard and seen.

The Shepherds: Message of the Messiah’s birth comes, not to the ‘important people’ of this world, but to peasants of no social standing. It is they who are there to welcome Jesus, the Messiah, at his birth.

Notice the different reactions: all who heard it were *amazed* at what the shepherds told them. The shepherds returned, *glorifying and praising God* for all they had heard and seen. We are told that Mary *treasured* all these words and pondered them in her heart. Francis J. Moloney notes;

“What must be noticed is that in all the contexts where ‘*to treasure in the heart*’ is mentioned, there are also indications that Mary did not fully understand what was happening to her, or to her son. The whole context of the birth story (2:1-21) ... creates wonder and often puzzlement, but not understanding. The Evangelist informs his readers of the parents’ reaction to their son’s sharp rebuke in the Temple: ‘*And they did not understand the saying which he spoke to them*’ (2:50). A similar puzzlement is found in the scene of the presentation of Jesus in the Temple: ‘*And his mother and father marvelled at what was being said about him*’ (2:33)... *Never* in these accounts is Mary in control. In faith, she treasures all that has been revealed to her, as she awaits the fulness of God’s revelation to her.”⁷

6 Elizabeth A. Johnson *Truly Our Sister*; NEW York: Continuum Publishing Group, 2006, pp 14-15,

7 Francis J. Moloney SDB *Mary: Woman and Mother*; NY: Wipf & Stock, 2009, p. 24-25

5. Gospel: Matthew 2:13-15.19-23

No sooner had the wise men/ the Magi laid their gifts at the infant's feet than Joseph received another command from God's messenger by way of a dream: "*Rise, take the child and his mother, and flee to Egypt.*" Though Jesus had scarcely arrived on this earth, his future was determined by a brutal murderer, Herod the Great. How sadly contemporary such a picture is, when the faces of refugee families from Ethiopia, Rwanda, Kosovo, Sudan, Iraq, Syria, Afghanistan and now Ukraine fill our television screens.

"The Gospel does not tell us how long Mary, Joseph and the child remained in Egypt. Yet they certainly needed to eat, to find a home and employment. It does not take much imagination to fill in those details. The Holy Family had to face concrete problems like every other family, like so many of our migrant brothers and sisters who, today too, risk their lives to escape misfortune and hunger."⁸

6. The Presentation in the Temple

*... Now there was a man in Jerusalem whose name was Simeon.
... He came in the Spirit into the temple;
and when the parents brought in the child Jesus...
he took him into his arms and blessed God, saying:
"Now, Master, you may let your servant go in peace, according
to your word,
for my eyes have seen your salvation, which you prepared in the
sight of all the peoples:
a light for revelation to the Gentiles, and glory for your people
Israel."
The child's father and mother were amazed at what was said
about him;
and Simeon blessed them and said to Mary his mother "Behold,
this child is destined for the fall and rise of many in Israel,
and to be a sign that will be contradicted – and you yourself a
sword will pierce – so that the thoughts of many hearts may be
revealed."*

Simeon is saying that people in Israel will react *for and against* Jesus. People would be called to make decisions, Mary too. Luke inserts this into the prophecy of Simeon to instruct his readers that

8 Pope Francis *Patris Corde*, Dec 8, 2020

Mary's "Yes" to God at the Annunciation did not lift her out of the necessary puzzlement, anxiety and pain which often arises from living out the Christian vocation. Mary, despite her remarkable beginning, still had to proceed through the rest of her life, say yes, "*treasuring in her heart*" the mysteries revealed to her.

7. The Finding in the Temple [Luke 2:41-52]

At the finding in the Temple, twelve years later Mary said to Jesus: '*My child, why have you done this to us? See how worried your father and I have been, looking for you.*' '*Why were you looking for me?*' he replied '*Did you not know that I must be busy with my Father's affairs?*' And we are told "*They did not understand what he meant. They returned to Nazareth and "His mother stored up all these things in her heart."*

Mary did not grasp immediately all that she had heard but listened willingly, letting the events sink into her memory seeking to work out their meaning. Mary's was a life in the process of becoming – no final answers yet available. Along this journey of faith, her great "Yes" at the Annunciation must be repeated over and over again, without her ever fully understanding the mysteries to which she is responding.

The Legacy of Pope Benedict XVI. In 1970 Joseph Ratzinger delivered a series of lectures on what shape faith might take by the turn of the Millennium. The lectures are available in a work called *Faith in the Future*. In that work he was predicting much of what has now come to pass, the demise of the strong position and influence of the Church in Europe. He saw a need to regroup and literally start from scratch and re-evangelise. In his view, this needs to be done in small dedicated, highly motivated, committed groups of people fired with the charisma of the Holy Spirit.

– BISHOP FINTAN MONAHAN, *The Homeward Journey*, Dublin: Veritas, 2023, p. 64.