

MARY – May 2006

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*May is Mary's Month, and I
Muse at that and wonder why.*

So wrote Gerald Manley Hopkins in his poem “May Magnificat” in 1878- although his thoughts may have been very different had he been writing today. One of the more recent developments in Catholicism has been the way in which Marian piety has ceased to feature, for many people, as an important part of their faith. I wonder how many churches will be observing the traditional devotion to Mary this month. I suppose we have to remember that the familiar May devotions are a fairly recent development, initiated by an eighteenth century Jesuit to promote chastity among unruly students in Rome- there is nothing especially sacrosanct about them.

Yet the growing absence of a devotion to Mary in the lives of individual Christians and the life of the church is worrying. Perhaps it's due to the strange belief that honouring Mary in some way defies Scripture- despite the unique relationship between Jesus and His Mother that the Bible testifies to. Perhaps it's because the church's teaching on Mary has changed so drastically. At one time Mary was the light in this world of darkness, her purity standing against the filth that would part us from God, our helplessness relying on her powerful intercession, her radiance shining in the midst of our misery and despair. Now, of course, we have to say instead that Mary is just like us- or, rather, that she is not different to us but is the type and model for the church and its members.

Her excellences and privileges are pledges of the dignity that awaits us all. In grace this is already taking shape within us. Yet we also need to remember that no one else has been so highly favoured by God. No one else has received so great grace. As Mary has been so highly exalted by God she is worthy to receive from us greater honour than any other human being or any of the angels. She is blessed in her purity and humility; blessed in being the Mother from whom God the Son

took His human nature; above all, blessed in her perfect obedience to the will of God.

In his book “The Orthodox Way”, Bishop Kallistos Ware writes, quite simply, that Mary is the living heart of our piety. This is why our observances today are so important. This is why honouring Mary has to be at the heart of our lives as Christians. I think that the ways in which Mary inspires and informs our piety and spiritual growth can show how Mary is unique amongst humans and yet encourages us to grow in holiness.

Mary’s life is centred upon God: “My soul magnifies the Lord, and my spirit rejoices in God my saviour”. She rejects self-reliance; she knows how totally she depends on God. Her cry witnesses to a compassionate God who stands alongside the lowly. A God who loved us first, and who never ceases to love us as His sons and daughters. Because of the unique event that took place in her womb Mary enjoys an intimacy with God that can never be duplicated and that we can never aspire to- yet Gregory of Nyssa tells us that what came about in bodily form in Mary takes place in us spiritually, in our souls. From the day of the angel’s message, Mary points us to Christ.

When Mary made this response to Gabriel she exercised her human free-will. She shows us the reality of human freedom. God did not compel her; God did not force her. It is through the process of making choices that we become more fully human. St John Chrysostom wrote-

God wants all to come of their own free will and choice, and with gratitude to him for this grace.

Freedom here means two things- first, freedom from sin- the sin that affects our relationships with our own selves, with creation and with God. Second, the freedom to grow in holiness. For us, this is the Lord’s call to a new and abundant life. When the angel related God’s plan to Mary he was, in a deep sense, sharing God’s plan for the whole world. God took a great risk- Mary could have said “no”. Yet with wonder and humility Mary offered her consent, and, by so doing, spoke on behalf of each and every one of us who seek to have God entering our own

lives.

Mary also provides us with the supreme example of collaboration with God. In a mysterious and profound way we are all called to share in the work of salvation. S Paul tells us that we are co-workers with God. The story of Mary reminds us that we are called to join with God in working not only for our own salvation, but also as his partners in the salvation of the world. S Nicholas Cabasilas wrote-

The Incarnation was not only the work of the Father and of his Power and his Spirit... but it was also the work of the will and faith of the Virgin.

Mary was open to the divine love and willingly co-operated with God's love ever since the first moment of her existence. She was endowed with divine grace from and even before her birth. Her invitation to become the Mother of God was, in a deep sense, the opportunity for which God was waiting, "in the fullness of time". S Epiphanius wrote-

Mary had been the occasion of life and through her, life had been born in us.

Finally, Mary shows us the value of relationships. Authentic relationships are a positive sign of expressing our human freedom. Put it like this: we are free to love a particular person, or to simply look away. When we love somebody we become caught up in their life. We share our life with them. Likewise, when we freely turn towards God in humility, we deepen our relationship with Him and become caught up in the divine activity of salvation.

There is an ancient saying: "A solitary Christian is no Christian." Being a Christian involves a relationship with Christ and a relationship with other followers of Christ. When we are united with Christ we are united with one another. Our discipleship is such that we are knit together with everyone else who is in Christ, both living and departed. Shortly after The Annunciation, Mary sought out her cousin Elizabeth. She could not keep her joy to herself. She had to share her experience of the "Good News". And so the Gospel dynamic began amongst God's people.

In icons we so often see Mary in the presence of Jesus, somehow directing our

attention towards Him. Sometimes with her left hand she holds her Son, and with her right hand points to the Lord, beckoning us to come to Him. As she reached out to her cousin Elizabeth she now reaches out to us, from heaven, through her prayer. As followers of Jesus we are intimately related to Him and to one another.

In honouring Mary this morning, we are affirming the fact that God first honoured her in calling her to be the mother of Jesus Christ. The honour that we give to her recognises her unique vocation in the plan of salvation. At the same time, the honour that we give her reminds us that Mary truly is one of us. She is one with us in our humanity and one with us in our discipleship. She is now crowned in the glory of heaven, more closely united with Jesus Christ than any other saint. Yet we can never rest in the thought of Mary, for her glory flows from giving birth to Him who is infinitely greater than His human mother. As we crown Her as Queen this morning, let us remember that Mary, Mother of God, today, radiant, more joyful and eager than ever, desires to share the Good News of her Son with us.