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Mary, Mother of God

Presenter: Barbara Hughes, OCDS

It seems only fitting that as we come to the end of these grace-laden days, we turn our gaze toward the most blessed among women, Mary, our mother and sister in faith. Before Adam and Eve walked with God, Mary was foreseen and planed in the mind of God. As the new Eve she became the vehicle through whom the Word of God was spoken and thus became the first to become God through participation. So, having saved Mary, the best wine for last, we now turn our attention to our Mother who sends us forth with the words, “Do whatever he tells you”(Jn 2:5).

No other woman has been written about nor depicted in art as often as Mary, making it difficult for me to know where to begin. But as I thought about what to say, my mind was drawn to another young Jewish woman, whom we Carmelites know as Sr. Teresa Benedicta of the Cross, but who to most of the world is known as Edith Stein. We’ve already heard a great deal about her earlier in the week, but I mention her here because Edith’s unrelenting search for Truth is how I imagine Mary as a young woman.

Mary was a seeker par excellence. When the Angel Gabriel appeared and told her she would bear a son, her immediate response was to ask how this would come about? Mary believed, but her faith was not a blind faith; it was an informed faith, and her pursuit of Truth was as relentless as her fiat was ongoing and unconditional. Whenever Mary was unable to comprehend the magnitude of all that was taking place, Scripture tells us she was silent as she pondered these things in her heart. Hers was a sacred silence, one that embraced the fullness of unknowing without the need to doubt, or know what God had not yet revealed.

In her autobiography, *Life in a Jewish Family*, Edith Stein described a post-conversion conversation she had with her mother. Referring to Jesus, Frau Stein said, “It’s not that I have anything against him. He was a good man, but why did he have to go and make himself God”? Reflecting on the conversation, a different version of her question comes to mind, which is: Why did God have to make himself man? Basically, it’s a question about the Mystery of the Incarnation.

Thomas Aquinas argued that even if the Incarnation was not absolutely necessary since God could have redeemed us in other ways, there was what he called a “necessity of convenience, a fittingness in the Incarnation of God”. That fittingness involved God’s participation in the human experience through mutual consent. The consummate union between heaven and earth needed to be situated within the context of time and space because time and space is the world that humans inhabit. And in order to enter fully into the human domain, a mother was needed, even it seems for God.

In becoming man, God held up the ideal of *created intellect* being united with *uncreated Spirit*, thereby ushering in the hope of human transformation through participation in God. Through the life, death, and resurrection of Jesus, God established the primacy of spirit over matter, but because we bear the consequences of sin, humanity’s fallen nature is subject to the gravitational pull of sensory satisfaction, fleeting though it may be. Consider how Esau sold his birthright for a bowl of stew. The pull towards the egoic self, which seeks pleasure and avoids pain, does so at its own risk since it estranges us from the wisdom of God. The more we succumb to the pull of the senses, the more we distance ourselves from the One who can lift us to the dignity that God desires for every person.

Only one person was spared the presence and consequences of sin, and that person is Mary. Yet even she was put to the test. Mary was given a choice, not because she needed to prove herself

to God, but as proof to the world that when the human intellect and will are perfectly ordered to serve our spiritual nature, nothing is impossible. Once this virgin daughter understood how the miraculous incarnation would take place, she consented to be the vehicle through whom the Word of God would come into the world. Dare we say - as scandalous as it may seem - that at that moment, the relationship between God and Mary was symbiotic because the Incarnation was mutually willed by both and thus interdependent?

The self-donation of Mary's DNA, blood, bone, and sinew became the material substance that knit together Spirit and matter, thereby clothing in her womb the Son of God with a nature that was both human and divine. Thus, we can rightly say that Mary was the first to become God through participation, which may explain why some believe John of the Cross had Mary in mind when he wrote that "we become God through participation" (N 2:20).

This makes sense, especially in light of the first creation story. In Chapter One in the Book of Genesis Scripture states, "God said, Let there be light" and there was light. It continues, "Let there be a dome... Let the waters be gathered...Let the earth bring forth every living creature..." an on and on. God spoke, and it came to be. In the Prologue of John's Gospel, the evangelist wrote: "In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God. He was in the beginning with God. All things came to be through him, and without him nothing came to be".

Without him nothing came to be, that is until God sent an angel to Mary, "Will you make me a man" and she said. "Let it be...." Similar, yet profoundly different. In creating the world, God spoke, and it happened. At the Annunciation, the source awaited a response before the word was spoken.. Mary's "Let it be" was that response. She was God's mirror. As far as is humanly possible, Mary was and continues to be a reflection of God's perfect love. As the moon is to the sun, so Mary is to God without whom there would be no light. Mary's fiat, her "Let it be done to

me” drew God down from heaven. And so it was that Jesus was born into a human family, but *not of a human family*. Mary’s virginity was miraculously preserved, but to better appreciate this, we don’t begin with Mary; we begin with her Son.

According to Ignatius of Antioch, there are three key mysteries in the life of Jesus, that cry out to the world and Mary was present at each of these events. They are: *The Virginity of Mary, preserved at the Incarnation, The Birth of Jesus, and Jesus’s Death on the Cross*. St. Ignatius calls them Mysteries of the Cry, not because these mysteries need to be proclaimed or cried out by Christians and the Church, but because the mysteries themselves cry out from the silence of God. And no one was better able to hear God speak in the silence more clearly than Mary. From early in her life, she understood that sacred silence resides not in the absence of sound, but in the spiration of the Holy Spirit.

Ignatius of Antioch found great significance in the fact that the central moments in the life of Christ are essentially nonverbal because the events transcend human language. In writing about the *Twelve Degrees of Silence*, nineteenth century Carmelite, Sr. Marie-Aimee of Jesus wrote, “Silence with God is to present oneself exposed in front of God, to offer oneself to God, to become nothing in front of God; adore God, love God, listen to God, hear God and find rest in God”. And isn’t that what Mary did? So, let’s consider these three mysteries and Mary’s role in each event.

The first is the VIRGINITY OF MARY, preserved at the Incarnation when God entered her womb. The word virginity means to be empty. In Mary’s case, not only was her womb empty, her entire being was empty of anything that was not of God. Her self-identity existed solely in relation to the Divine. Mary understood that she was nothing without God, so when the angel said, “The Holy Spirit will come upon you and the Power of the Most High will overshadow you and the

child you conceive will be the son of the Most High” (Lk 1:33-35), her immediate response was to identify herself as handmaid of the Lord and then give her consent.

Mary’s declaration as handmaid was more than a proclamation of self-transcendence, it was an act of surrender that yoked her to God as his slave. Recall Jesus words in “My yoke is sweet and my burden is light” (Matt 11:30) and again, “I tell you, everyone who commits sin is a slave to sin” (Jn 8:34).

There’s nothing sweet about slavery but being yoked offers a different perspective. To be yoked is to work together as partners. Consider a couple that falls in love and quite happily surrenders their will to their beloved. They plan a future together mindful that there will be challenges as well as moments of wonder and joy. In the years that follow, one may work harder than the other; there may be discord, even accusations that the other is not doing his or her fair share. But when Jesus says his yoke is sweet and his burden is light, he is telling us that he is doing the heavy lifting; our role is simply to walk beside him. Mary understood this perfectly. God was her beloved – her betrothed - and in surrendering her will, her emptiness was filled, and her joy was complete. Paradoxically, the loudest word ever spoken was audible only to a young girl who had barely entered the fecundity of womanhood.

In his book, *The World’s First Love*, Archbishop Fulton J. Sheen explained that in human marriage there is something personal (love) and something impersonal (the sexual act). He explains that the effects of a sexual act are beyond human control and therefore, belongs to God’s determination. God is very much involved in the act of sex. Yet how often we hear pro-choice groups say, “God has no place in our bedroom”. Consider that when a couple has intercourse, even when love is freely given, there are also unknowns: whether or not a child is conceived, the

sex of the child, the exact time of birth; even the moment of conception is beyond a couple's determination.

Other mothers know there is life within them by the changes they experience in their body weeks, sometimes only months after sexual intercourse takes place. Mary knew the divine life was present within her immediately, not through carnal knowledge but through mystical knowing. In that moment, she became the wedding chamber for a marriage between heaven and earth and her womb a incubator for the Son of God. In Mary, the child conceived waited not upon a natural process between sperm and egg but upon the oneness of her will with the will of God. Just as God formed Adam the first man without the seed of a man, so the physical body of Christ was formed without the seed of man. The God-man came to be through the simultaneous fusion of wills between God and this most pure woman.

Mary had been preemptively redeemed through her Immaculate Conception, but it was through her consent that her redemption was ratified. As the Mother of God, Mary entered into the singularly favored relationship with the Triune God as *Daughter of the Father, Mother of the Son, and spouse of the Holy Spirit*. Not only did Mary's fiat espouse her to Love Eternal, it ushered in the means by which mere mortals could be espoused to God. We know this because numerous saints have been brought to the spiritual marriage during which they experienced, not only a spiritual infusion, but a physical invasion on a sensory level.

During the transverberation, St. Teresa saw an angel and in his hand was a large golden dart. At the end of the iron tip, there appeared to be a little fire. In describing the experience, she wrote, "it seemed to me this angel plunged the dart several times into my heart and that it reached deep within me. When he drew it out, I thought that he was carrying off with him the deepest part of me and he left me all on fire with the great love of God. The pain is not bodily but spiritual,

although the body doesn't fail to share in it, and even a great deal" (L 29.13). Did Mary experience God's entrance on a physical level? We don't know since Scripture remains silent on the matter but, it's likely when we look at the lives of the saints.

Consider St. Francis of Assisi on whose body was imprinted the physical wounds of Christ, and St. Rita who bore a single wound from Jesus's crown of thorns on her forehead. When Catherine of Alexandria was wed to Christ, she was presented with a wedding ring made of Jesus' own flesh. Each mystical marriage was experienced differently. The commonality seems to lie in the presence of a physical phenomenon that touches the body as well as the soul. In Mary's womb, the Word of God was made flesh. We are not angels, nor was Mary, so it's possible that she felt something stir within her womb when God became one with her, not only in spirit but in flesh.

After the angel disappeared, Scripture tells us that Mary made haste to the hill country of Judea. What went through her mind during those early weeks is not for us to know. However, St. Teresa noted that in the 7th dwelling places, the soul is privy to conversations within the Trinity itself since as Teresa noted, "God desires to remove the scales from the eyes" (IC 7.1.6). Therefore, it's plausible that Mary would have been aware of the presence of the Holy Trinity within her soul. About this same mystical state, John of the Cross wrote:

How sweetly and lovingly you awaken my heart,
where in secret you dwell alone;
And in your sweet breathing, filled with good and glory.
How tenderly you swell my heart with love (LF 4)

Nevertheless, despite any similarities with other saints, Mary's favor was a singular favor that would never be repeated again in the history of the world. She was chosen to bring the new Adam into the world, and in consenting to this extraordinary privilege, she became the new Eve.

The second mystery of the cry according to Ignatius of Antioch is THE BIRTH OF JESUS. According to Scripture, “Mary gave birth to her first-born son and wrapped him in swaddling clothes and laid him in a manger” (Lk 2:7). As the new Eve, Mary gave birth to Jesus, the new Adam. Just as Mary’s fiat reversed the sin of disobedience to God, so the order of birth was reversed when the new Eve gave birth to the new Adam, carrying in her arms the one who had created her.

According to Genesis, Adam was placed in an ecstatic sleep while his rib was removed to form the person of Eve. When Jesus was born of Mary, it’s believed by many that she was in an ecstatic state so that Jesus entered the world as silently and as miraculously as he entered the virgin’s womb. Ignatius of Antioch notes that the actual moment of Jesus’ birth had no witnesses, which led early Christian fathers to draw a comparison between Jesus’ exit from the womb with that of his exit from the tomb. Tertullian agreed, adding that it was necessary for the author of a new birth to be born in a new way. And Archbishop Sheen wrote, “The first man, Adam was made from the slime of the earth and the first woman was made from a man in an ecstasy. The new Adam comes from the new Eve, Mary, who in an ecstasy of prayer and love of God and the fullness of freedom gave birth to Jesus”

Mystic, Venerable Mary of Agreda whose cause for beatification Pope Francis has reopened described Jesus’ entry into the world as a supernatural event, explaining that Mary was caught up into ecstasy prior to the birth. She explained, “He did not divide but penetrated the virginal chamber as the rays of the sun penetrate the crystal shrine, lighting it up in prismatic beauty, and the Virgin Mary beheld the son in all his glory much the way he appeared on Mount Tabor”. In his interpretation of the birth of Jesus, John of the Cross wrote:

When the time had come for him to be born / he went forth like the bridegroom

from his bridal chamber / embracing the bride / holding her in his arms. (*Poetry 9: The Birth*)

That God held Mary even as she held him represents the mutual exchange of love between the bride and the Bridegroom. The words of John of the Cross seemingly echo John Damascene who wrote: “The bodiless One, takes a body from this woman and comes forth from the bridal chamber as Bridegroom although he is God”.

At the birth of Jesus, only his mother is mentioned. Presumably, St. Joseph was present, but what he actually witnessed in regard to the birth is unknown. The next reference in Scripture is about the shepherds, who likely told Mary and Joseph of the angels’ song. Luke tells us only that, “Mary treasured these words and pondered them in her heart” (Lk 2:19). Such numinous experiences can only be savored when wrapped in silence because they are beyond human machinations.

In the hours that followed, one might wonder what was in Mary’s heart as she gazed upon this God-child nursing at her breast? As she cradled him in her arms, shielding him against Bethlehem’s winter, was her heart warmed by the flame of love that burned within? Might she have been the first to appreciate the mystery of redemptive suffering endured by her son from the moment of his birth until his death on the cross? Did gazing upon the poverty of God prepare her for all that she was to endure? Was she able to reconcile the suffering of children with the Son of God who was laid in a manger and sheltered in a stable with animals, their vacant stares representing the many who have eyes but do not see. God chose to be born into poverty in a borrowed cave is a testimony to his truth that “In weakness power is made perfect”.

In his Letter to the Ephesians, Ignatius of Antioch wrote, “He who possesses the word of Jesus is truly able to hear [God] even in the very silence, that he may be perfect, and may both act as he speaks, and be recognized by his silence.”

Mystics all agree that silence is the secret ladder by which privileged souls descend into the deepest center of the soul, discover their own poverty, and ascend the mountain of the Lord. John of the Cross wrote, “We shall know that we shall be like him” and “Thus we shall be God through participation (N2.20.5) (Jn 3;2). The God-man came into the world as a helpless babe, dependent on the human milk of his mother, becoming like us so that we can become like him.

This brings us to the third mystery of the cry: THE DEATH OF CHRIST. Jesus’ death on the cross was a public event, but Ignatius notes that in a sense, “it is among the most hidden events. When the Word of God died, the silence was deafening”. Consider that in response to the Son’s cry, “*My God, my God. why have you forsaken me*” there was only silence. Silence from the Father and silence from his Mother who stood at the foot of the cross. Mary’s response to the cry of human agony was received in silence by the Father as Jesus descended into the abyss of human hopelessness, loving us unto death, becoming our despair without despairing. He who knew no sin, took on the sins of the world, trusting the Father, even when every light on earth was extinguished except for the light that burned within the heart of his mother. We can never know what was in Mary’s heart as her son was taken down from the marriage bed of the cross, but when I ponder Michael Angelo’s sculpture of the Pieta, I am reminded of a scene described by a dear friend, whose young adult son languished for years in a comatose state.

For eleven years, my friend and her husband tenderly cared for their son in their home. On the day when it seemed death was imminent, my friend called her husband who hurried home from work. By the time he arrived, their son had already died, and so her husband gathered his broken body that weighed less than a hundred pounds, into his arms and rocked him as he did when their son was an infant. There were no words to describe the couple’s anguish just as there are no words

to describe the anguish of Jesus' mother when her son surrendered his last breath to his father. Once again, silence is the only response.

Still we may wonder: As Mary accompanied the funeral procession to the tomb, did she intuit in the silence that more was taking place than the world could fathom? Did God breathe hope into her soul in what seemed like life's darkest hour? As the earth quaked and thunder clouds roared, did the final mystery of the cry pierce her heart as the temple veil was rent and time stood still? From Mary's womb to Jesus's tomb, the Virgin Mother bowed in silent adoration as the words, "Let it be" were once again audible only to the Father. Though God seemed more remote from earth than ever, Jesus' descent into darkness ushered in a new beginning. The old order had passed away. Privileged as she was, Mary, who stood at the threshold of the old and the new was spared the stain of sin, but not spared the painful consequences of sin. She who was without sin suffered for the sins of her children. The first to become God through participation, she also became first to participate in the redemptive suffering in union with her son.

St. Alphonsus Liguori pays tribute to Mary in a beautiful poem that speaks to this. He wrote:

She does not seek pleasure, has no wish or will of her own / The will of her sweet spouse is the soul's pleasure and desire of the soul, who is the bride of Christ. / And since suffering is the best sign, which more than love, can reassure the beloved / the spouse who desires to show all her love, accepts gladly all suffering and every pain.

Only those who follow Jesus, not only in word and sacrament, but in redemptive suffering can appreciate how moments of gaping silence can be a cautionary blessing, because God achieved great things within moments of greatest silence. St. John of the Cross explained, "The Word of God is truly heard in silence by the soul". And Pere Jacques held fast to the belief that "silence is

the great master, not an empty void because God dwells therein”. And so, we listen, attending to the words of Jesus - those spoken and unspoken - and for this, we have no better model than Mary.

When dryness during prayer is our only experience; when God has gone silent in our lives, and prayer and the Scriptures that once moved us so deeply seem strangely—perhaps scandalously—stale to us, we can take comfort in knowing that God speaks loudest in the silence of a listening heart. As we hold the sacred mysteries of the cry deep within, we keep vigil with Mary, knowing we are yoked with Jesus who leads us ever deeper into the Trinitarian love of God. When life, as we know it, is disrupted, we hold fast, trusting that such disruptions are an invitation to self-transcendence so that we, like Mary, can be all for God.

Suffering was part of Mary’s life as she and Joseph sought refuge in Egypt, hers when Jesus remained behind in the temple. On the road to Calvary and at the foot of the cross, suffering was her lot. It was hers when she accompanied the apostles to the upper room after Jesus ascended into heaven, and hers as she witnessed the birth pangs of the early Church. There is no suffering that we endure that Mary hasn’t experienced in one way or another.

Mary continues to teach us that life’s most significant lessons are revealed when we unite our suffering with that of Jesus and that hidden within the cloud of unknowing is true wisdom. As Catholics, we honor Mary who is Queen of Heaven and Earth, where she reigns, not as some distant queen from afar, but as mother who draws us close to her son.

Mary remains with us. Her heart is with her children on earth. The author of the Book of Wisdom, perhaps unknowingly, referenced Mary when he wrote, “Send her forth from your holy heavens and from your glorious throne dispatch her”. The words take on a special significance when we consider the many apparitions of our heavenly Mother, but perhaps no more

dramatically than in the case of Mariam Baouardy, known as the “Little Arab”, born in a remote village in Galilee in 1846.

At the age of twelve, she refused to marry, since she had early in life given herself to Christ. Defending her faith as well as her virginity, she was viciously attacked with a knife, her neck partially severed, and her body discarded in an alley. By her own account, the would-be-martyr came to in a cave where a beautiful Lady dressed in a blue robe had stitched her neck in place and for the next four weeks nursed her back to health. Though few words were exchanged, the young girl who later became Sr. Mary of Jesus Crucified believed her caretaker was the Blessed Mother. Carmelites are familiar with her story. She suffered greatly throughout her life but was also favored with the stigmata, bilocation, ability to read hearts, levitations and a supernatural radiance of her face, and more. She died in 1878 and was beatified in 1983 by Pope John Paul II and canonized in 2015.

Sr. Mary of Jesus Crucified is a physical example of how God sends his mother to tend the wounds of her spiritual children just as she nursed the scrapes and bruises of the child Jesus. Our Lady’s apparitions are a manifestation of how she tenderly cares for and tends to the wounded Body of Christ. Her influence as intercessor and caretaker is real, more pervasive, yet remains largely unknown, except for those whose lives she has changed.

At the closing of a Marian retreat I facilitated, a woman who was a convert to Catholicism from Hinduism, shared her story. After giving birth to a healthy baby girl, she was told that during the night her daughter suffered a severe stroke and that if the infant survived, which was doubtful, her physical and mental development would be severely impaired. Distraught, the woman felt compelled to flee to the hospital chapel. As a Hindu, she did not believe in Jesus, but upon seeing the statue of Mary, she threw herself in front of it and as one

mother to another, pleaded with Mary to heal her daughter. Why she felt the urge to do this, she could not explain, but the next day, an MRI revealed there was no permanent damage to her daughter's brain. The infant, now a teenager, has been healthy her entire life. Attributing the healing to Mary, the mother began to rethink her previous beliefs, and eventually became Catholic.

Rightly or wrongly, we as a people are prone to be skeptical of religious experiences. Yet, given the many stories I've been privileged to hear, I believe Jesus, Mary and the saints are just as actively involved in the lives of people today as they were in days of old. A friend, who works in ecclesial ministry shared with me that she is the seventh of ten children. When her mother was pregnant with her, her mother was in terrible pain, which made even walking difficult. She became depressed, resented being pregnant, and doubted whether she could even love the child she was carrying. One day, feeling quite despondent, she experienced a vision of Mary with Jesus who appeared to be about two years old. They were surrounded by children of many nations and ethnicities, and during the vision, Mary seemed to speak directly to her heart saying, "If I can love all these children, you will be able to love your child". Following the vision, Marjorie's mother was filled with peace, her depression was lifted, and she happily carried the child to full term. Not only was she able to love the child in her womb, she went on to give birth to and love three more children during the years that followed. Only as an adult did my friend learn of Mary's visit to her mother. One can only wonder how many supernatural events have taken place that remain hidden in the hearts of believers, secrets that remain between God and the souls whom he has healed.

About Mary's extensive reach, Archbishop Sheen wrote: "The instinct of all men to look for a mother in their religion exists not only among Christians but non-Christians as well. He

commented on the fact that when the pilgrim statue of our Lady of Fatima was carried in procession at the edge of Nepal, 300 Catholics were joined by 3000 Hindus and Muslims as four elephants carried the statue to the Church. After the Rosary and Benediction, worshippers of all faiths passed through the church to pay homage to Mary for more than 12 hours. Cardinal William Keeler believed that Mary would play a key role in bringing people of all faiths together.

May we as Carmelites never forget we owe much to Mary our Mother and Patroness whose habit St. Teresa reminded us we are privileged to wear. Mary confirmed her deep affection for the order when she appeared to St. Simon Stock and appeared at Fatima dressed in the Carmelite habit. The saints of Carmel pledged their allegiance to Jesus in part because of his mother who told us we are to do whatever he tells us. And so we come before her as her sons and daughters and pray, “Let it be done to me according to Thy word”. Now and forever. Amen.

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