

January 1, 2020
Solemnity of Mary, Mother of God
Cistercian Abbey – Fr. Thomas
Numbers 6:22-27; Galatians 4:4-7; Luke 2:16-21

In preparing for Christmas, the Church presented us with the sweeping plan of salvation sketched out in the Old Testament through the various prophecies – the shoot sprouting from the stump of Jesse, the arrival of Immanuel, the Messiah to be born in Bethlehem – all representing the promise that God Himself gradually revealed His plan to shepherd His sheep. At the same time, the Church also directed our Advent eyes to the second coming of Christ at the end of time; the liturgical year closed with the great solemnity of Christ the King, who will definitively establish his eternal reign when he returns to judge the living and the dead.

Now that Christ has been born and we have torn another year off the calendar, we might be inclined to feel overwhelmed at the sheer magnitude of salvation history, painfully aware of our miniscule role in the story; and yet today's celebration of Mary as the Mother of God reminds us of the meticulous detail God invests in that plan and in every single one of us.

As the dogma of the Immaculate Conception asserts, Mary was prepared for a unique mission to be the mother of Jesus. Conceived without stain of original sin, she was created to be the pure Ark of the New Covenant by containing the presence of God in her womb. It is marvelous to ponder that for all of God's arrangements over the timeline of Israel's history, the plan of salvation for the entire human race hinged on the consent of a young girl in Nazareth, whose yes to the angel ensured that she would be the mother of Jesus, and later hailed as the *Theotokos*, the God-bearer.

As Paul reminds us in his letter to the Galatians, we have become adopted sons and daughters of God through Christ the Son. That makes Mary, in a very real sense, our mother. But is she even approachable as a mother, as someone who can share our burdens and calm our fears? A recent UD alum confessed to me once that she struggles with the idea of Mary. "How do you relate to perfection?" she asked me. Mary seems to have had it easy, lacking that fundamental tendency to selfishness that inevitably distorts our intentions and actions. A good and tempting question, no doubt. But I reminded her that Mary's perfection does not at all mean that she was all-powerful or all-knowing, and therefore untroubled by the prospect of mothering the Son of God; in fact, the Evangelists often present her as questioning the plan of God, of being troubled by what her Son is up to. The standard assumption of the great theologians of the Church is that Mary suffered even more than we do *on account of her purity*; the cleaner

a soul is, the more acute is the pain caused by the sin, weakness, and hatred evident in others. Mary becomes aware of this fact just 40 days after giving birth; when presenting him in the Temple, she receives a prophecy from the elderly Simeon that a sword would pierce her heart when she witnessed the unjust murder of her son (Luke 2:29-35).

The Gospel passages detailing Mary's uncertainty, confusion, vexation, and sorrow are numerous, and worth pondering.

“And coming to her, [the angel Gabriel] said, ‘Hail, favored one! The Lord is with you.’ But she was greatly troubled at what was said and pondered what sort of greeting this might be” (Luke 1:28-29).

“But Mary said to the angel, ‘How can this be, since I have no relations with a man?’” (Lk 1:34).

When the twelve-year old Jesus stays behind and his parents find him after three days of searching:

“[... His parents] were astonished, and his mother said to him, ‘Son, why have you done this to us? Your father and I have been looking for you with great anxiety.’ And he said to them, ‘Why were you looking for me? Did you not know that I must be in my Father's house?’ But they did not understand what he said to them” (Lk 2:48-50). (I suppose Jesus himself could be an adolescent punk on occasion – but he had solid theological grounds for being so!)

And Jesus doesn't exactly make things easy on his mom as a grown-up either:

“While he was speaking, a woman from the crowd called out and said to him, ‘Blessed is the womb that carried you and the breasts at which you nursed.’ He replied, ‘Rather, blessed are those who hear the word of God and observe it’” (Lk 11:27-28).

“A crowd was sitting around him; and they said to him, ‘Your mother and your brothers and sisters are outside, asking for you.’ And he replied, ‘Who are my mother and my brothers?’ And looking at those who sat around him, he said, ‘Here are my mother and my brothers! Whoever does the will of God is my brother and sister and mother’” (Mar 3:32-35).

Lastly, Mary experiences the desolation of watching her son die, and of being entrusted to another man, according to St. John:

“Standing near the cross of Jesus were his mother, and his mother's sister, Mary the wife of Clopas, and Mary Magdalene. When Jesus saw his mother and the disciple whom he loved standing beside her, he said to his mother, ‘Woman, behold your son.’ Then he said to the disciple, ‘Behold your mother.’ And from that hour the disciple took her into his own home” (Jn 19:25-27).

But Luke's presentation of Mary also contains verses of quiet calmness and beauty in the face of a tremendous and overwhelming mystery. Today's Gospel is the first:

“So [the shepherds] went in haste and found Mary and Joseph, and the infant lying in the manger. When they saw this, they made known the message that had been told them about this child. All who heard it were amazed by what had been told them by the shepherds. And Mary kept all these things, reflecting on them in her heart” (Lk 2:16-19).

And as a conclusion to his infancy narrative, Luke summarizes the rest of Jesus' childhood in the following way: “He went down with them and came to Nazareth, and was obedient to them; and his mother guarded all these things in her heart. And Jesus advanced in wisdom and age and grace before God and human beings” (Lk 2:51-52).

These two passages give us a precious hint about St. Luke's source of information for the opening chapters of his Gospel. Mary is the first bearer of memories about Jesus; what we read as a well-known and polished story in the Gospel pages, she lived without any certainty of the ending. As the epitome of grace, she experiences firsthand the great truth about motherhood: that it is one unending lesson in hope without guarantees. Some expectations are met, and many are unmet, in the months of engagement and the first years of marriage; after all, love is blind – marriage is an eye-opener. Pregnancy brings with it an astonishing blend of joy and fear: after perhaps great difficulty in conceiving, a mother faces the constant threat and, on occasion, the reality, of miscarriage, but also delights in the prospect of nurturing and knowing that being outside the womb one day. There seems to me a melancholic mystery at work in the formation of little bodies with immortal souls, especially given the inevitable maternal burden of watching your children mature and educating them so that they can leave the nest when they are fully grown. The difficulty in trusting God is surely a constant at every stage of parenting.

Motherhood immediately came to my mind when I recently read a rather stunning quote by St. Thomas Aquinas: “The truly penetrating knowledge of created things is associated with an abysmal sadness, an insuperable sadness which cannot be lifted by any natural force of knowledge or will.”

In all maternal care, there always lurks a foreboding sense of loss, an implicit disquiet, about a wide spectrum of possibilities: sickness, a child's loss of faith in high school or college, embittered relationships. Those who cling tenaciously to the earthly achievements or reputation of their children, or who treat the fleeting joys of their children's dependence on them as the ultimate good of their entire lives wishing never to lose them, are quite pitiable in their desperation. We have here, after all, no lasting city, no perennial joy in created things (including children) that can withstand the

pressures of mortality. Every joy is a hint of eternal bliss, but every sorrow is a reminder that our ultimate happiness still awaits us.

For these reasons, the mother of God is utterly (Aquinas would probably say preeminently) relatable to mothers, and in a sense to all Christians, today. Her own perspective of her Son, portrayed in the Gospel pages, provides us with both consolations and challenges as we mark the beginning of this new year praising her maternity. From the moment of her “yes” to the annunciating angel, her life was defined by the virtue of hope without guarantees; she did not possess the infallible knowledge of the script her Son would write with his earthly life, and for that reason, her hope is all the more glorious and worthy of our imitation.

Like Mary, all we know as we sojourn in this mortal existence is that Christ has given us the assurance that ultimate victory will be ours if we persevere, if we are vigilant in seeking and desiring His coming, pointing out His presence in our lives as best we can to those entrusted to us. That requires us to share one another’s burdens, to bring our needs confidently to our interceding Mother so that she may prompt her Son on our behalf, just as she kick-started his own ministry at the wedding feast of Cana (Jn 2:1-11).

The calendar always restarts in the season of bleak mid-winter, when the light of the sun is at its shortest and dimmest. This is a blessing for us; it reminds us that Christ is the true light coming into the world, illuminating the darkness not simply of the season, but perhaps also of our intellectual and moral lives. Mary was the first candle chosen by God to be the light-bearer; her maternal love inspires and teaches us how to carry that same flame into the new year.