

## POST-VATICAN MARIAN SPIRITUALITY ---

### THE MAGNIFICAT

Presentation: Francis X. (Barney) Sheridan  
Marist Family Laity Conference  
Quincy, Massachusetts  
April 17, 2004

In our Marist charism, one goal states: "To think as Mary, judge as Mary, feel and act as Mary in all things". This presentation reflects that search. One might say that there are some advantages to being old. For example, some of us can reflect on the spirituality of the church-of-our youth, before Vatican II, and also on that of the church today. Such reflection serves to clarify our personal spirituality today. For me, part of this clarity comes from reflecting on Mary's spirituality, which I find personified in her prayer the Magnificat.

### THE WESTERN CHURCH

It would be good to briefly review the origin of the spirituality of the church-of-my-youth. In the early church, there was a nice balance of reason and faith supporting the church's spirituality. Matthew could explain the gospel to the Eastern mind in terms of the faithfulness of God to his promises and the covenant. On the other hand, Mark could explain the same message tersely and with explanations because he was writing mainly to the Greeks. However, around the year 1000, there was a schism between east and west and with that came a dominant Greek focus in the west on Aristotelian thought and reasoning, and in the east on the great mysteries of our faith. In the west, St. Thomas Aquinas gave us the gift of Scholasticism. 500 years later, Protestantism overtook the west and the church reacted with the Post-Reformation paranoia against anything unorthodox. Relying on reason, the church resorted to law and regulations to control our spirituality. We became obsessed with our obligations and our loyalty to the Petrine church. Combined with the Jansenism raging around Europe, we also learned to hate the body and feel guilty about everything sexual.

I have to add to that I was born to a Bronx Irish Catholic family so political and religious culture highlighted the adversarial position between faiths. There was another particular Irish dilemma in the spirituality of my youth: On one hand, the culture was very individualistic and said "everything was up to you" and you were responsible for everything, (especially not being perfect). On the other hand, you "were not worthy" and if you thought yourself capable of anything, you were told you were letting your pride get in the way. I came to think that my best was never good enough. This just increased my spirituality of legalism, guilt, and self-denigration.

In the church-of-my-youth, we were taught that there were four

types of prayer: praise, thanksgiving, sorrow and petition. Looking back, I didn't pray as much in praise and thanksgiving as I did in sorrow and petition. In my self-denigration I spent my time pleading for God to give me all good things that would make me happy. (I used to say I was praying to know God's will, when in truth, I was praying for God to know my will.) In my sorrow, I prayed for release of guilt so my soul would be saved. Most of my prayer was all about me, not all about God.

## **THE PROBLEM OF THE HORTATORY SUBJUNCTIVE**

I now realize that I suffered a particular heresy in those days. I call it the problem of the hortatory subjunctive (mostly because I'm an old Latin teacher). The hortatory subjunctive is the tense you use when you want to encourage someone to do something or to wish for some favor. In English we usually say: "Oh, may such and such a thing happen." A lot of my prayer used to sound like that, but now it seems like heresy to me. I used to say: "May God have mercy on me." Now if you mean you're asking for mercy that you know God is ready to offer you, that's OK. However, I used to think that God had a choice. Either God would have mercy on me, or He wouldn't. That's nonsense! God always has mercy on anyone who asks for it. God is love. God is mercy. He has no choice. Unfortunately, I thought the same way when I prayed, "May God bless you." (What else would God do?) I get distracted at mass when I hear, "May God be with you. And also with you." What does that mean? After all, God is with you and also with me. What am I praying for? Maybe (as a reminder) we should say, "The Lord is with you. And also with you." Or, maybe "May you be aware of God being with you. And you be aware too!" Anyway...

## **THE EASTERN CHURCH AND MYSTAGOGIA**

Getting back to our discussion of history, the Eastern Church did not experience the same trials as in the west. Oh, they had their own problems, for sure. But, they never gave up their focus on faith above reason. An example of this might be: If someone in the west was told "Humanity can never understand God", there would be immediate faith assent, and then someone would say, "But, let's figure out as much as we can understand about God." If you said to someone in the east, "Humanity can never understand God" their answer might be "Oh, wow, that's true. Let's celebrate the wonder of that great truth." Somebody would immediately go get incense. There would be no call for syllogisms. Eastern Catholics are not afraid of mystery; they celebrate it. What they have to offer us to let us let go of our compulsion to understand and control. We can believe because of our relationship with a Risen Christ. We can celebrate the Spirit of God in us; God abiding in us as Jesus promised. Continuing mystagogia calls for us to honor and celebrate the God who abides in us, dwells in us and fully loves us. It asks me to explore the mystery of the presence of that God in my personal experiences.

## **VATICAN II**

Then Vatican II came about. The Pope called for the windows to be opened and fresh air to come in. We were asked to return to the balance of faith and reason as in early tradition. The east shared its emphasis on faith and the west was refreshed with that emphasis: The primacy of our union with Christ in the Mystical Body, the presence of the Spirit living in us, an awareness of mystery. We could give up needing to understand, and surrender to believing. We were asked to focus not just on Scholasticism, but on a continuing mystagogia. We were asked to stop being just an unworthy crucifixion people and return to being an anointed people, a "resurrection people whose song is alleluia".

## **MARY**

It should not surprise us that our devotion to Mary should reflect the culture and spirituality of the time. In the church-of-my-youth, the legalistic culture of judgment and guilt was so oppressive that I needed a soft and nurturing influence in my spirituality. Mary, my good mother – *la bonne mere* – was the answer. I appealed to her to be as non-judgmental and as accepting as a mother is to her child. My desperation was promoted by the church, even by Marists. It was full of fear that we came to Mary: "pray for us sinners now and at the hour of our death." "Mother of mercy,... to you do we cry, poor banished children of Eve. To thee do we send up our sighs, mourning and weeping in this vale of tears." My early approach to Mary was as a needy child, longing for succor from a spiritual, nurturing mother I could trust. It seems to me that Mary was the only soft, feminine, caring element of the church-of-my-youth when confronted with a legalistic, judgmental God. I sought her intercession and protection.

Unfortunately, there was a great trap in such a spirituality of Mary as intercessor. It made God to be a "God out there". God was fearsome. We needed someone to intercede for us, to plead our cause, to convince God to respond to us. But isn't this insulting to God? Is God really someone who needs convincing? In reality, isn't God constantly trying to strengthen us, to love us, to forgive us, to abide with us, to unite to us – and to do so whenever we ask and as soon as we ask? The idea of someone having to intercede with God for us is really nonsense. All God asks of us is openness to his will and his grace and everything is ours. Mary's role in our lives is to show us how to have that openness. We go to Jesus through Mary by imitating her example of such abandonment to God's will.

## **MARY'S FIAT**

When we speak of our going to Jesus through Mary, we mean using Mary's example and inspiration to approach Jesus. All saints in the

church are offered to us to show us the way. Mary, clearly the most unique and primary saint in the church, models for us the perfect spirituality to approach the divinity. Her openness to God is stated in her terse statement of complete abandonment to God: "Behold the handmaid of the Lord; be it done unto me according to your word." Nothing expresses so succinctly a total trust in God's loving presence with us and God's protection of us. This is the essence of Marian spirituality. Clearly, we could meditate on and imitate her Fiat for the rest of our lives.

Searching the scriptures for other examples of Mary's openness to God, we find it is Mary's openness to life that provides her with her life experiences, and some of them are confusing. She was unable to understand them, (Luke 2:50) but that didn't matter. She trusted in God's presence in her life, and accepts God's presence in her life. She never questioned it. Instead, she meditates on that mystery: Emmanuel, God was with her. "And Mary kept all these things, reflecting on them in her heart." (Luke 2:19, 2:51) To me, this is Mary's *modus operandi*. This is how she spends her time: meditating on the mystery of the presence of God in the experiences of her life. I believe this too is Marian spirituality. It is something I can imitate in Mary. I can continually explore the mystery of the presence of God in my experiences.

Otherwise, in the gospels, Mary is silent. We can only imagine Mary's confusion yet abandonment to God at Calvary. We can only imagine Mary's confusion yet joy with the other Maries at the Resurrection. We can only imagine Mary's communal prayer life in the early church at Ephesus with John.

## **THE MAGNIFICAT**

*My soul proclaims the greatness of the Lord, and my spirit rejoices in God, my Savior.*

*For you God has looked down upon the lowliness of your handmaid, and henceforth all generations shall call me blessed. You mighty one have done great things in me, and holy is Your Name.*

*Your goodness is from generation to generation, to all those who revere you.*

*You have shown might with your arm, dispersing the arrogant of mind and heart.*

*You have torn down the mighty from their thrones, and have exalted the lowly.*

*The hungry you will fill with good things; the self-satisfied you will send away empty.*

*You have been mindful of your people Israel, as you promised to our ancestors, to Abraham and Sarah, and to all their descendents forever.*

Luke 1:46-55

Mary's declaration of self-gift to God at the Annunciation and the witness of her life experiences help us to imitate her. But it is in the "Canticle of Mary" in response to Elizabeth at the Visitation that we have a special gift. We are invited to look into the soul of Mary as she tells us her prayer to God --- Mary's spirituality revealed. She reveals to us her attitudes toward God.

Scripture scholars tell us that Luke's gospel was written about 80-90 AD. Most likely, the Magnificat was not a quote from Mary. Each line of the prayer seems to be snatched from a psalm or another part of Jewish scripture. Scholars think it may have been a hymn of the early Jewish-Christian community. No matter. Luke chooses to put these words in Mary's mouth because they personify the Palestinian spirituality of the early church. If not a quote, Luke feels the Canticle expresses a projection of Mary's sentiments.

### **Meditation on the Magnificat**

*My soul proclaims the greatness of the Lord, and my spirit rejoices in God, my Savior.*

Wait a minute. Mary's not asking for anything. She's praising God. And she's not groveling for mercy. She's rejoicing in her Savior. That's very different from the way I was led to pray. For Mary, it's not about herself. It's about God. It's not about trying to merit anything (as if we could merit salvation!). These two lines sound more like the Jewish way of blessing God which we brought in to our liturgy. "Blessed are you, God, King of the Universe..... who has given us this bread to eat and this wine to drink." Usually, I ask God to bless me or others. The eastern way is gratefully to bless God.

*For you have looked down upon the lowliness of your handmaid, and henceforth all generations shall call me blessed.*

Note that Mary didn't have the title yet of 'Bless-ed Virgin Mary'. She didn't mean bless-ed as an honorary title but meant being blessed, the recipient of God's presence and action in her life. And she wasn't afraid to be known as a lowly human being. In the church-of-my-youth (and for quite a while later), I was so embarrassed when people found out my weaknesses, my sin, my defects of character and my shortcomings. I thought my lowliness would scandalize others who thought I should be perfect. Mary doesn't. She knows her lowliness only makes God's action in her life even more amazing.

*You mighty one have done great things in me, and holy is Your Name.*

To me, this is the most radical statement of spirituality in the Magnificat. Unlike what I was told as a youth, it's not "all up to me". In fact, theology tells us that my salvation is an act of God. My part is

simply to be open to it. To let God work in me. "Behold the handmaid of the Lord; be it done unto me according to thy word." Mary knows this and knows it is God's name that is holy and to be honored. Mary seeks God, not "out there", but within herself and within the context of her own life experiences (the great things that God has done for her). She finds God present in those experiences. It seems to me that we are called on by that thinking to explore the mystery of God in our own life experiences. God is not present to me in someone else's script but in my own. God is not stagnant in the script I wrote for myself as a youth. The unique challenges of our lives force us to respond to Christ as he calls us to love in our unique way. It seems incumbent on us to reflect on our past history and to praise God for all the times of divine grace in our personal history – whether or not we were aware of them. Some people write out "Gratitude Lists" to help them be aware of at least some of those events. It's seems to be a salutary spiritual practice.

*Your goodness is from generation to generation, to all those who revere you.*

Mary knows that God wants to abide in all people. God can be trusted by everyone down through the ages. God is totally inclusive. The challenge in this line seems to be on us – to revere (not fear) God. To believe in God, trust in God, and open ourselves up to God.

*You have shown might with your arm, dispersing the arrogant of mind and heart.  
You have torn down the mighty from their thrones, and have exalted the lowly.*

Mary thinks rightly. All those whom the world thinks as important but in pride are closed to God: arrogant political leaders, arrogant church leaders, arrogant CEOs, and all other arrogant people. They are really not the ones who will save the face of the earth. They are easily dismissed. Those who are humbly open to God acting in and through them will be effective in real power, i.e., God will use them to soften the hearts of others and through them the world will be converted to the good news.

*The hungry you will fill with good things; the self-satisfied you will send away empty.*

Mary knows that those who are spiritually hungry will be filled to the brim, as Christ has promised. Those who are filled with the clutter of this world, who are closed to God's action, and have no room left for God to act in them. This is not a condemnation of humans, but an invitation to review our desire and hunger for God.

*You have been mindful of your people Israel, as you promised to our ancestors, to Abraham and Sarah, and to all their descendents forever.*



Mary not only explores the mystery of the presence of God in her own life, but does so in the context of her faith tradition – the covenant – and her faith community – the chosen people. She seems to invite us to wonder not only about the presence of God in each one of us, but to do so in the context of our faith communities.

### **SUMMARY**

The church-of-my-youth still lives in me. Even when I give intellectual assent to the great things God has done for me, there is still some small voice in me that cautions; "Don't feel good. You don't deserve it." Well, OK, I don't deserve all the blessings of my life by my own merit. God has done great things for me. But, I can celebrate those gifts. I know that Christ has accepted me. God has affirmed me. God has anointed me in Baptism to be Priest in Him, Prophet in Him and King in him. God has anointed me in the Spirit in Confirmation inspiring me to use my God given gifts on behalf of others. When I became sick, God anointed me with the Oil of the Sick. In my long life, God has given me a long list of blessings. God has proved over and over again his presence in me. He loves me infinitely, unconditionally, arbitrarily and personally. He calls me by name, and I am his.

How dare I wallow in my brokenness and think that it's all about me, being obsessed with myself and groveling before the divinity. I am in truth both broken and anointed. Why don't I, like Mary, spend my prayer life recognizing the great things God has done for me – my anointedness. How can I spend such little time in praise and thanksgiving? Why don't I, like Mary, embrace the God who abides in me instead of the "God out there"? Can I further let go of arrogance, and become even more spiritually hungry? Why don't I use Mary's good example and acknowledge that it's really all about God, not about me? Maybe I need more time meditating on and praying Mary's Magnificat.

Source and references: Essay received from Barney Sheridan 10 August 2004

most recent revision : 10 August 2004