

MARY'S PLACE

IN OUR FAITH



UNPACKING THE EMMAUS SERIES

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THE EMMAUS SERIES



Questions Catholics ask on their journey of Faith

MARY'S PLACE IN OUR FAITH

SESSION 1

Introductory reading

Mary, Mother of All Christians (1964, pp 84-87)

by Max Thurian, one of the founders of the Taizé Community, who has since become a Catholic

After the marvellous encounter between Mary and Elizabeth, we are given the *Magnificat*, a canticle which expresses the messianic joy of Mary ...

This canticle of the Virgin Mary is shot through with biblical references. As with the account of the Annunciation and the Visitation, we can note here a constant use of the images and words of the Old Testament. Mary is, in this canticle, the true Daughter of Zion, the fulfilment of the messianic hopes of Israel. She appears as one living in close contact with the history of her people, and with the Scriptures – with which she is so familiar that she expresses her joy in the very words of the prophets ...

In the expression of her delight, there is, at one and the same time, an expression of awe-inspiring truth and yet a remarkable intimacy: Mary humbles herself before the mystery of this salvation which her motherhood is to assist and she calls God 'her Saviour'.

Like every other creature she needs him: it is He who, foreseeing her divine motherhood, has prepared her for that 'yes' which she has been able to speak so simply; it is He who, during the whole of His earthly life, on the Cross, at the Resurrection and the Ascension, by His intercession before the Father and by the gift of the Holy Spirit at Pentecost, is going to support her in that faith and fidelity which will secure for her eternal salvation: her spirit rejoices in God her Saviour.

Mary thus calls forth the event of the Annunciation by which God has made her own personal salvation known to her, and at the same time the salvation of the whole human family. The Lord of all glory has been willing indeed to consider the poorest and most insignificant of His creatures in order to make of her His Handmaid. And so we meet the great theme of a poverty which receives the blessings of glory. It is because Mary has nothing with which to establish her own claim, because she is scarcely more than a child and a virgin, and because she is poor and dwells in an unknown village and has neither pride nor power nor riches – it is because of all these things that God loves her and chose her in order that He might do great things in her, and make her the Dwelling of God, the Mother of God. The glory of the Lord here enters into the world through the gateway of humility and poverty. □

Questions opening up the topic

Groups have a Buzz Session – in the spirit of Sympathetic Listening described in the booklet 'Getting Started' pp.14-15 – sharing reactions to the following questions:

Questions

- ◆ What questions do you bring to our discussion of Mary's place in our faith?

- ◆ Devotion to the Mother of God has always had an important place in our outlook as Catholics. How do you think this tradition has been affected by the changes brought by Vatican II?

Viewing of Video DVD

- ◆ *Introduction*
- ◆ Chapter 1:
Mary's Central Place in Our Faith
- ◆ Chapter 2:
Mary in the New Testament

Sharing of reactions to the presentation

Groups have a Buzz Session – in the spirit of Sympathetic Listening described in the booklet 'Getting Started' pp.14-15 – sharing immediate reactions to the presentation:

Question

- ◆ What has struck you as enlightening, inspiring, or even puzzling?

A reading related to the theme

The Poor of God (1964, pp 93-94, 98)

A work of the French scripture scholar, Albert Gelin.

At last on a certain day came the mystery of Nazareth. The Incarnation took place in profound silence. The Galilean hamlet was not mentioned in the Old Testament. It was even asked if anything good could come from such a place. To this place without a past ... was brought the announcement of messianic joy, because at its centre was a silence, a surrender, an emptiness, a longing – this was Mary...

(Greeted by her cousin, Elizabeth) Mary did not refuse the word 'Blessed'. Her cousin's greeting provided the occasion and, as it were, the theme of the *Magnificat* ('My spirit rejoices in God my Saviour. He looks on his servant in her lowliness; henceforth all ages will call me blessed').

Mary's song is more than a fabric woven of Old Testament quotations. In it we hear a woman who has so identified herself with the *anawim* (the poor who place all their trust in God) that, conscious of the newness of the Incarnation, she has become their perfect and living expression...

Mary's great soul lit up themes taken from the past and she drew new meaning from their inmost depths ...

The connection between the *Magnificat* and the Beatitudes (of the Sermon on the Mount) has not gone unnoticed. (In the words of M.-J. Lagrange, a great pioneer of today's best biblical scholarship) 'If it were possible to press that far the analysis of the human development (of Jesus), we could say that we see in him, as in so

many others, something of the influence of his mother'. Yes, it was at Nazareth that the Saviour, watching his mother and listening to her words, loved the *anawim* (God's poor) whom he would one day declare to be his disciples. ◇

Final reflective sharing

This final sharing of personal responses to the questions given below is the most important phase of the session, and should be entered into generously, in the spirit of the Sympathetic Listening described in the booklet 'Getting Started' pp. 14-15.

It may begin with a brief period of silent reflection, which is followed by two stages:

- 1. An informal Buzz Session in which each participant is able to express their response to each question – questions should be discussed separately;*
- 2. The sharing is brought to a conclusion, with each participant expressing, in a few words, what is their personal response to each question – in view of all that has been discussed in the session.*

Questions

- ◆ What is your reaction, as you come to recognise that so much can be found in the brief references to Mary in the scriptures?
- ◆ From what we have seen in this session, what image of Mary most appeals to you?

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SESSION 2

Introductory reading

A homily of St Bernard of Clairvaux (12th cent):

The angel is waiting for your answer: it is time for him to return to God who sent him. We too are waiting, O Lady, for the word of pity - we who are overwhelmed in wretchedness ...

And behold, to you the price of our salvation is offered. If you consent, straightaway shall we be made free. In the eternal Word of God were we all made, and lo! we die; by one little word of yours in answer shall we all be made alive.

Adam asks this of you, O loving Virgin, poor Adam, exiled as he is from paradise with all his poor wretched children; Abraham begs this of you, and David; this all the holy fathers implore, even your fathers, who themselves are dwelling in the valley of the shadow of death; this the whole world is waiting for, kneeling at your feet ...

Answer, O Virgin, answer the angel speedily - rather, through the angel, answer your Lord. Speak the word and receive the Word; offer what is yours, and conceive what is of God; give what is temporal, and embrace what is eternal.

Why delay? Why tremble? Believe, speak, receive! Let your humility put on boldness, and your modesty be clothed with trust ... In this one thing alone, O prudent Virgin, fear not presumption; for although modesty that is silent is pleasing, more needful now is the loving-kindness of your word.

Open, O Blessed Virgin, your heart to faith; open your lips to speak; open your bosom to your Maker. Behold! the Desired of the nations is outside, knocking at your door. Oh! if by your delay he should pass by, and again in sorrow you should have to begin to seek for him whom your soul loves! Arise, then, run and open. Arise by faith, run by the devotion of your heart, open by your word. 'And Mary said: Behold the handmaid of the Lord: be it done to me according to your word'. ◇

Questions opening up the topic

Groups have a Buzz Session – in the spirit of Sympathetic Listening described in the booklet 'Getting Started' pp.14-15 – sharing reactions to the following questions:

Questions

- ◆ In the first session, some challenging issues were raised. Did the first session leave you optimistic or pessimistic?
- ◆ Do you have reflections that came to you since the first session that you can share with the group?
- ◆ Do you think Marian devotions sometimes become unbalanced?

Viewing of DVD

- ◆ Chapter 3:
Changing Perspectives in Christian Awareness
- ◆ Chapter 4:
Vatican II affirms both points of view

Sharing of reactions to the presentation

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Question

- ◆ What has struck you as enlightening, inspiring, or even puzzling?

A reading related to the theme

Constitution on the Church (Ch.8) Vatican II

Through the gift and role of the divine motherhood, Mary is united with her Son, the Redeemer, and with his singular graces and offices. By these, the Blessed Virgin is also intimately united with the Church. As St Ambrose taught, the Mother of God is a model of the Church - in her faith, charity, and perfect union with Christ. For in the mystery of the Church (herself rightly called mother and virgin) the Blessed Virgin stands out in eminent and singular fashion, as exemplar ... For, believing and obeying, Mary brought forth on earth the Father's Son ...

The Church, moreover, contemplating Mary's mysterious sanctity, imitating her charity, and faithfully fulfilling the Father's will, becomes herself a mother by accepting God's word in faith. For by her preaching and by baptism she brings forth, to a new and immortal life, children who are conceived of the Holy Spirit and born of God ...

In the most holy Virgin, the Church has already reached that perfection whereby she exists without spit or wrinkle (cf. Eph.5) ...

Mary figured profoundly in the history of salvation and in a certain way unites and mirrors within herself the central truths of faith. Hence, when she is being preached and venerated, she summons the faithful to her Son and His sacrifice, and to love for the Father. Seeking after the glory of Christ, the Church becomes more like (Mary) her exalted model, and continually progresses in faith, hope and charity, searching out and doing the will of God in all things ... The Virgin Mary in her own life was an example of that maternal love by which all should be animated who cooperate in the apostolic mission of the Church, seeking the rebirth of all peoples. (nn.63, 64, 65) ♦

Final reflective sharing

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Questions

- ♦ In your personal attitude to the Mother of God, do you think you can combine recognition of her unique greatness, and a grateful awareness that she is an inspiring model for all of us?

- ◆ Are there ways in which we can foster a healthy devotion to Mary in our parish communities?
- ◆ What is the principal thing you take away from these sessions on Mary?

SUMMARY OF PRESENTATION

From the Church's beginnings – as the New Testament makes clear - Mary has been seen as a great sign of encouragement for believers. References to Mary, though they may seem brief, are deeply meaningful, presenting Mary as a figure of immense significance for the communities that produced these texts. St Luke, in his Gospel and Acts of the Apostles, skilfully portrays Mary as the model of discipleship, the one who "hears the Word of God and puts it into practice". Taking a central theme of the Scriptures, St John sees Mary as the "woman" in God's ultimate plan, and "mother" of the family of the disciples of Jesus.

The veneration of Christians down through the ages has had two different emphases. Until the 12th century, Mary was seen as the model of all the Church is called to be. In later centuries, Christians came to emphasise Mary's unique greatness - as the Church was led by the Spirit into the recognition of the full implications of the "great things" God has done for Mary. Within this perspective, a debate in the 14th century, that vindicated Mary's "Immaculate Conception", set the pattern for a Marian Movement, whose program has been the vindication of the incomparable "glories" of Mary.

At Vatican II these two points of view were both present, and gave rise to tensions. Some bishops expected the council to speak in a special document of the unique greatness of Mary. Others - following the lead of John XXIII – were convinced that the renewal of the Church should be the council's main concern; and they proposed that the ancient view should be re-emphasised, and Mary should be presented as the model of all the Church is called to be.

The council followed the second path, at the same time making it clear that both emphases are in accord with our Catholic tradition. If the faith of tomorrow's Church can integrate and the two points of view, our people's appreciation of Mary will be greatly enriched. □

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