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Mary: Carmel's Elder Sister

By Robin Stratton

When Carmelites commemorate Mary as the Blessed Virgin of Mount Carmel, we celebrate the fact that we are her sisters and brothers. In the thirteenth century, the first title by which Carmelites were called was the *Brothers* of the Blessed Virgin Mary of Mount Carmel (the Sisters did not exist until nearly two centuries later) – not her servants, slaves, sons, or daughters – but her brothers and sisters. That which was our first title is also our most contemporary one. We are placed in a familial relationship with Mary as sisters and brothers to her and to one another. “What we say of Mary, we say of ourselves.”¹ Historically, we have moved from a realm where Mary stands above us in solitary splendor – a realm in which we cannot compete – to a realm of co-operation where we learn with her – and as she did – the meaning and cost of discipleship. Mary stands in solidarity with us. She is a woman of our history with her own journey of faith. Together we share blessedness as the daughters and sons of the One God.

The mystery of Mary is the mystery of the be-gracing of each one of us. Each of us is the beloved of God. Pope Paul VI wrote in his Apostolic Exhortation on Mary:

“It is impossible to honor her who is ‘full of grace’ without thereby honoring in oneself the state of grace, which is friendship with God, communion with God, and the indwelling of the Holy Spirit.”²

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Here we stand in union with the great Carmelite tradition—from the Prophet Elijah whose cry “The Lord God lives in whose presence I stand”³ has echoed in hearts through the centuries, to Blessed Elizabeth of the Trinity whose life was wrapped in the Mystery of the Indwelling God.

The mystery of Mary is the mysterious proclamation that our whole self is involved in the process of salvation—that the whole person is brought to fulfillment at death. To quote Pope Paul again:

[Mary] is given to us as a pledge and guarantee that God’s plan in Christ for the salvation of [the whole person] has already achieved realization in a creature: in her. Contemplated in the episodes of the Gospel and in the reality which she already possesses in the City of God, the Blessed Virgin Mary offers a calm vision and a reassuring word to modern men [and women], torn as we often are between anguish and hope, defeated by the sense of our own limitations and assailed by limitless aspirations, troubled in our minds and divided in our hearts, uncertain before the riddle of death, oppressed by loneliness while yearning for [community]. . . She shows forth the victory of hope over anguish, of community over solitude, of peace over anxiety, of joy and beauty over boredom and disgust, of eternal visions over earthly ones, of life over death.”⁴

The Mary we encounter in Luke 11:27-28 and Acts 1:12-14 tells us of three movements in the mystery we share with her: learning, living, loving—learning how to be a disciple by hearing the word of God and responding to that word with our very lives; living in the midst of a praying community; loving and sharing—the fruit of watching and waiting at the passages of life.

The passage in Luke’s Gospel tells us how we are to understand the meaning of discipleship. Mary does not achieve blessedness because of the fact that she bore Jesus in her body—God could have found another way to have given us the gift of Jesus—her blessedness, according to the Gospel, lies in the fact that she heard the word of God and lived it out. The word of God came to her more often in the events of daily life than we all want to think. Stop for a moment and ponder how God’s word came to the young woman refugee fleeing to Egypt in order to escape terror and death; or to the woman whose twelve-year-old son had either run away or been kidnapped; how did God’s word echo in the heart of the middle-aged woman who heard the gossip that her son had gone mad—what went through her heart as she set out to bring him home? What of the mother who stood at the place of execution outside the city walls and waited helplessly as her son died the death of a common criminal. How did God’s word inform these experiences? The events we tend to carefully shade from God, she entered into and transformed with the eyes of faith, the courage born

of hope, and a heart of immense love. Mary could have said with the poet Rilke, “I find you in all the things of the world . . . in things no one cares for you brood like a seed.”⁵ And between the great moments, there were the months and years of dailiness around the village well, the joy and burden of caring for a home, raising a child, growing in her relationship with Joseph, helping neighbors. All these activities were nourished by an ever-deepening relationship with the Holy One—a relationship that drew her always beyond herself. It was as though God were her pillar of fire—constantly moving ahead of her—ever challenging her to keep moving lest she be left without the light that gave meaning to her life. Mary learned discipleship through the experience she underwent in the passages of her life. Her faith and hope and love “moved through the things of the world like a servant, groping out in roots, tapering in trunks, and in the treetops like a rising from the dead.”⁶ “What we say of Mary, we say of ourselves.” Faith gave life and meaning to the events of Mary’s life—a faith nurtured by “pondering the word of God day and night, and watching in prayer.”⁷

At the beginning of the Book of Acts, we gaze upon a woman who “could not choose to live a half-life when she was presented with the choice of a full one.”⁸ Mary would choose life—only that—and at whatever cost. (cf Deut. 30:19) Mary had, by this time, survived the Death, Resurrection, and Ascension of Jesus. She could not but have known that the motley crew of His disciples was nearly as suspect in the eyes of the Authorities as Jesus had been—and yet there was something that held her in the midst of the disciples. There was life, there was truth, there was a struggle to live life to the full despite the all too human frailty that lived with and through fear, locked doors, denials, and that wonderful escape of falling asleep on the one they loved when the going was really tough. None of this stood in the way. It was the raw material of human life through which the followers of Jesus grew in knowledge of themselves—and of Him. They came to know who God was for them and who they were called to be. Mary grew with them. What happened during the days that they lived together as a praying community, waiting for the coming of the Spirit? What transformed this frightened group of people who closed the doors upon themselves? What took place as they prayed? Prayer seems to have made them ready to receive the Power of God in their own frail flesh when God’s Spirit came upon them as Fire. The fruit of prayer was that they turned outward. The doors opened. The years of ministry began—a ministry that would carry them into places and situations beyond their wildest imaginings. The Cenacle could no longer contain them. They were impelled to reach out to strangers who became friends—friends who became sisters and brothers. Fear was overcome in the experience of reaching beyond themselves to do as Jesus had done. The post-Pentecost ministry as it is described in Acts

included praising God in prayer, preaching the word, waiting on tables, and caring for the helpless and abandoned of society. It was not a matter of prayer *or* ministry. It was a ministry that grew from prayer and led back to prayer. The two cords of love for God and love for others were so inextricably bound together in their lives that one could not sunder either of them without destroying both.

A friend of our community recently went as a Witness for Peace to pray at the Nicaraguan border—to make a statement for peace with her own body. This decision had grown out of her prayer. In prayer, she discovered that the world is her village—its people her sisters and brothers, flesh of her flesh. When we pray, we can never be alone. And we can never be certain of where the commitment to prayer will lead us. All people and world events become part of ourselves. Mrs. Kaddafi's grief over her dead and wounded children is my grief as well; as is the plight of farmers in the Midwest; the Russian families caught in the wake of a nuclear catastrophe are my family; child-soldiers in Central America are my younger brothers and sisters; starvation in Africa isn't "over there"—it is pain in my heart. Teresa of Avila claimed that prayer is apostolic—it reaches out fingers, hands, bodies, and hearts of ministering love to do what one can. Even as Mary did in her own life. Mary never stands in isolation from us. She is always in relation, in solidarity with us—our sister in faith, hope, and love. For her as for us, discipleship consists of a two-fold task: the praise of God in prayer and action on behalf of justice. As disciples of Jesus, as sisters and brothers of Mary, we are called to a fruitful love, to a strong and vibrant life.

She is tender. She is strong. She is woman. She is the one who made the journey ahead of us. Her life lights our way—a way that was blessed because of a relationship to which she was faithful for a lifetime. In every Eucharist we celebrate, we remember her. We make her present in our remembering. As her sisters and brothers in the family of Carmel, we unite with all the generations who have gone before us on the journey of faith. We stand together on the Mount of Carmel and pledge ourselves anew to walk with her the journey of life. With her we will choose life—only that—and at whatever cost.

Notes

1. Sister Beth Johnson, SSJ. Conference at Baltimore Carmel, November, 1983.
2. Paul VI. *Marialis Cultus*. Boston: Daughters of Saint Paul, 1974.
3. I Kings 17:2.
4. Paul VI. *ibid.*, #57.
5. Rilke, Rainer Maria. *Selected Poems of Rainer Maria Rilke*. Trans. Robert Bly. New York: Harper and Row, 1981, p.33.
6. *Ibid.*, p.33.
7. From *The Carmelite Rule*.
8. La Rosa, Linda J., *Winter of the Heart*. New York: G.P. Putnam and Sons, 1984.