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Robin Stratton, O.C.D.

Mary: From Cana to Calvary

IN THEIR WONDERFUL PASTORAL LETTER *Behold Your Mother*, written in 1973, the American Bishops told us something amazing, something we have not yet begun to plumb. They told us this: "Whatever we say of Mary, we say of ourselves." Whatever we say...and what do we say? We say that you and I are invited to participate in the same spirit of prayer known to Elijah and Mary; that the Spirit poured into Mary at her conception, at the Annunciation, and in her daily living out of the Word of God is the same Spirit poured into you and me at Baptism and in our daily lives; that the Spirit Who prayed in Mary prays also in us and makes each of us a child of the one God and sister or brother to every child of God.

The Gospel account of Mary standing at the foot of the Cross tells an ordinary story—one we have all heard, one in which we have participated in some way at some time in our lives. It is the story of one person standing at the deathwatch of another. In John's Gospel we are told only two things of Mary: at the beginning of Jesus' ministry, she attended the wedding feast of Cana and invited him to change water into wine for the embarrassed bridegroom; and at the end of his life, Mary stood at the foot of the cross and watched him die. Our imaginations try to trace the pattern of the years in between, with a little help from the other Gospels.

Luke speaks of an angel coming when Mary was young and of Joseph taking a pregnant woman as his wife after an angel came to him in a dream. Mark tells us that Jesus claimed his disciples as his mother and sisters and brothers when told that his mother was outside looking

for him. We catch a glimpse of her life here and there. At times it shocks us, at other times delights us. What of the days and months and years about which we are told nothing? Were they not simply lived to the rhythm of seasons known to us all—dailiness punctuated by births and weddings and deaths?

Thérèse on Mary

In 1897, St. Thérèse of Lisieux said the following of Mary in her conversation with her sister Mother Agnes:

How I would have loved to be a priest in order to preach about the Blessed Virgin! One sermon would be sufficient to say everything I think about this subject....

We shouldn't say unlikely things, or things we don't know anything about!... For a sermon on the Blessed Virgin to please me and to do me any good, I must see her real life, not her imagined life. I'm sure that her real life was very simple. She should be presented to us as imitable, bringing out her virtues, saying that she lived by faith just like ourselves, giving proofs of this from the Gospel where we read: "And they did not understand the words which he spoke to them." And that other no less mysterious statement: "His father and mother marvelled at what was said about him." This admiration presupposes a certain surprise, don't you think...? (*Last Conversations*, p. 161).

In her poetry, Thérèse depicts Mary's life as one of "simplicity, humility, and total devotedness to Jesus, her Son. She points out how the [Mother of Jesus] walked the ordinary way, and therefore she can be followed by 'little ones.' There were no miracles, no raptures, no ecstasies—only service" (*Last Conversations*, p. 235). Thérèse understood that the darkness Mary experienced on Calvary was the darkness she herself was experiencing on her own deathbed, and she often asked Mary to come stand by her.

Romano Guardini, in his book *Mary, Mother of the Lord*, speaks of the relationship of Jesus and Mary in terms of the Son's always leaping one step ahead of his mother, and of Mary's faith as enabling her to make the leap to catch up with him. When he leapt upon the cross, she took the greatest leap of faith of her entire life: she leapt and stood beside him—knowing no more than we know, but standing in faith beside her Son—jeered, no doubt, as he was and judged to be the mother of a common criminal. I am reminded of Mrs. Poncelet in the film *Dead Man Walking* showing pictures of her young son Matthew to Sister Helen. Now that young son, grown to manhood, is sentenced to death. She walks from the visiting room the day of his execution, throws herself against the hood of the truck, and pounds out her grief.

At the Cross

Mary stood at the cross, we are told, clinging to her belief, trying to make sense of the angel's word spoken in her youth: "He shall be the Son of God."—This broken man? This "worm, not a man?" This bleeding, quivering flesh?—The Son of God? "How can this be," she cried now in her heart, as she had asked on a brighter day in the presence of the angel's words. In that moment she repeated the words of her youth, of her young adulthood, of her womanhood: "Yes, I am yours—I trust you—I believe." For, when all is said and done, we only know the least important things in life—the rest we believe.

"I do not know," she must have said, "I do not understand. But I believe you. I trust you." In that relationship, that union of love, she makes the greatest leap of faith she has ever made. She would leap upon the cross and die with him. But no, a greater leap than this is asked of her: to live for him, to stand here till he dies, and then to go home. She is asked to make of this day of all days an ordinary event. She is asked to do as countless persons have done since the beginning of time: to wait with a loved one, and when the last breath has been breathed, go home to wander about the house, to make arrangements, to wait, to tell stories, to begin to acclimate to life without this one with whom we have shared some part of ourselves. So she too went home to wait, for what she knew not. Yet in her soul other stories echoed: a son raised, the only son of a widowed mother; a little girl given back to her father; their friend Lazarus raised to life; For her, for now, however, there was only this great gaping hole of death. Still she believed. She waited. And grieved. And believed.

For a sermon on the Blessed Virgin to please me and to do me any good, I must see her real life, not her imagined life

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