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Marian Mariology

CHAPTER 38



The veneration of Mary, when properly understood, permeates the entire life of the Church; it is a dimension of dogma and of piety, of Christology and of ecclesiology. This dimension needs to be made explicit today in connection with the problems of humanity. Mariology expresses something fundamental to the Christian life itself, to the Christian experience of the world.

Sound Mariology has always been understood in Christological terms. If the Gospel revealed nothing more than the fact that Jesus Christ, God and man, was born of Mary, this alone would be sufficient for the Church to love her and to draw theological conclusions from pondering this relationship of Mother and Son. We need no other revelations. Mary is a self-evident and essential *datum* and dimension of the Gospel.

Chapter one centers on Catechesis flowing from Byzantine Marian spirituality with commentary by Brother John M. Samaha, S.M. Chapter 2 discusses Mariology today with commentary by Rev. Professor Michael Lapierre, S.J. The remaining chapters are commentaries on various Marian topics by Fr. John A. Hardon, S.J. (1914– 2000).

Chapter 38

Mary Magnifies the Lord

by Fr. John A. Hardon, S.J.

Prayerful reflection on Mary's Magnificat is always in order. It is the longest discourse we have recorded of the contents of Mary's heart. Totally inspired, it is the perfect prayer of humility. It is a sublime prayer of humble adoration. The Magnificat has been a part of the Church's liturgy since the first century. Ancient monks and hermits recited it daily and it might well be said to be The Prayer of Religious.

As all the Church Father and the great biblical masters of the ages have affirmed, there are four parts to the Magnificat, each with its own revealing theme. In the first part, Mary expresses her gratitude to God. In the second, she praises God for His power, His holiness and His mercy. In the third, she compares how differently God deals with the proud and the humble. And in the fourth, she recalls that all the ancient prophecies to the Jews are now being fulfilled in the Messiah, who was already then in her womb.

We begin with the gratitude of Mary. "My soul magnifies the Lord." This is another way of saying, "My soul praises, honors, adores and admires the Lord." Always the stress is on the Lord. What a contrast between Mary's attitude and that of so many people over the centuries, including today. Think of all the praise and honor, medals and statues honoring human beings who sadly often deserve blame, even condemnation, rather than praise. Think of the heroes we have studied about – the

great heroes whose exploits we had to memorize. There have been men who have destroyed races of people to achieve their ambitions. We all remember Napoleon, but how many of us remember the Pope he forced into exile? How strange that we should be so ready to praise human beings and so slow to praise God Who deserves our every consideration.

Faith tells us that the prayer of praise and or adoration is the first and most important form of prayer we can offer to God. Indeed, unless this form of prayer is at least implicit, we are not even praying, because when we praise (or as Mary says, when we “magnify” God), what are we doing? We are acknowledging God for who He is and by contrast, admitting what we are. “How great thou art, O Lord, how great thou art!” And by contrast, how little and trifling is everything and everyone else.

And then Mary adds, “And my spirit rejoices in God my Savior.” Joy follows praise. God wants us to be happy. He wants us to rejoice in Him, but to rejoice in doing His Will and not that of the world’s, the devil’s or that of our own human inclinations. It is, indeed, a lie to think that we are happy doing our own wills. Such thinking was not only born in hell, but hell was born because of that declaration. That is how hell came into being. There is only one real joy on earth and that is to live in Him, for Him and with Him, our dearest Lord.

Mary had a very clear idea of who she was – she was the Mother of the Messiah. If she needed to be told (and she didn’t really), Elizabeth had just told her she was the mother of the Lord who had made her. Mary also had no doubt by whose favor she was thus blessed. Compare the two phrases “lowliness of His handmaid” and “He who is might has done great things for me.” God the Almighty did great things for Mary precisely because in her own estimation she was only the lowly servant of the Lord. This is all that God asks of us; to tell Him, “You alone are mighty and I, except for you, are nothing.” That is the truth. I am indeed just the servant of the Lord.

In the second stanza, Mary tells us about her praise of the Almighty. God does not need our prayers nor do they add to His happiness, but He still wants them. He wants us to recognize Him for what He is. And according to Mary, He is power, He is holiness, and He is mercy.

How is God power? He is power because He can do whatever He wills. Perhaps the clearest and most painfully obvious sign of our being just creatures is the distance, the chasm that separates what we want and what we can do. Not God. He had only to will the world into existence, and it was made. He had only to will our souls into existence, and we were made. We exist only because God wills it. If He withdrew His willing, we would cease to be. In our day, when power is the watchword and the rules of this world put so much fear into people’s hearts, we have to keep our balance. We

must tell ourselves, "I am not impressed by human power, nor do I hear what any human being can do to me. The One I adore is also the only One I fear – the Almighty One." If we have the honesty and humility to acknowledge God's greatness and our many limitations, we are safe. He alone has the right to tell us what to do, and then we do it. No wonder the saints were so powerful – they had the Almighty Power at their disposal.

How is God holiness? He is holiness because He is the Wholly Other. He alone must be; He alone cannot not be. Everything else, including ourselves, is quite unnecessary. We talk about growing in holiness, but what do we mean? We mean that we are to become more and more like God. And what is it that makes God holy? In the last theological analysis, it is the fact that God is utterly unworldly. He does not need the world and yet there wouldn't be a world without Him!

When God enlightens us it is always towards unworldliness. Look at what the world respects, what it considers great, what it honors and admires. An unworldly person is not preoccupied with the things of space and time but has his mind and heart on eternity. An unworldly person is not enamored of this world because he knows this world and all its vanity will soon pass away.

How is God's Mercy? God is mercy because He loves the sinner even as He hates the sin. His mercy is boundless and his kindness toward the weak is fallen and proverbial. Yes, we have sinned often, perhaps deeply, but He still loves us. That word "still" is most consoling. God's love is greater than my sin. He wants us to become more holy just because we have sinned. We cannot explain that, but we must believe it. He wants our humility to increase as well as our patience and our prayerfulness.

There are many books and magazines that advise us to be so conscious of our sins but rather to think of God's love. True enough, we can't think enough of His love for us, but not to think about our sins is nonsense. It is precisely that combination, divine love and our sins, that is the very definition of God's mercy. That is what mercy is. The Infinite Love of the Trinity from all eternity became divine mercy only when man had sinned and that love could exercise its benevolence, its forgiveness toward the sinner. To live in a real world, we must be constantly counterpoising God's love with our sinfulness. God's perfect manifestation of His love is His Mercy shown toward us sinners.

Now, in the third stanza of the Magnificat, Mary compares the proud person with the humble one. Mary tells us that, "He has scattered the proud." "He has put down the mighty." "He has sent the rich away empty." Compare this with "He has exalted the lowly." "He has filled the hungry with good things." Mary goes on telling us these things, but it is really her son, Jesus, Who is in her womb that is speaking to us through the lips of His mother.

God exalts the humble; He humbles the proud. But we often suppose that this reward of the humble and retribution of the proud takes place with regularity in this life. That is not so. Sadly, but obviously, the proud grow prouder day by day. They, the proud, are exalted. Who makes the headlines? Who is honored and praised in this world, and who is ignored? But no matter how long a human life may be, it is very short compared to eternity. That is why faith in heaven and hell is so strengthened as we recite the Magnificat prayer and are assured by Jesus, speaking through His mother, of what God eventually always does. Heaven is the glorification of humility, and hell is the humiliation of pride. Remember heaven and hell are both real!

Finally, Mary tells us that God keeps His promises. Reread the Old Testament. It tells of one disloyalty after another as the Jewish people refuse to live up to their covenant with Yahweh. Their constant relapsing into idolatry, their resistance to God's commands. Reread Jeremiah. What he calls the Jewish people is almost unprintable. And yet, after all their infidelity and disloyalty, after having murdered His prophets, ignored His laws and resisted His Will, there is nevertheless a covenant between Yahweh and His people. They had failed Him, but as Mary reminds us, God does not fail.

How we need God's reassurance. In spite of all of our past infidelities, God will not abandon us. God is a faithful God. He asks us not to become discouraged.

Mother of Jesus, Mother of us, teach us your quiet peacefulness and childlike confidence in your Son. Help us to trust Him, especially when things go wrong. Help us to believe in Him as you did, that the promises He makes to us He will always fulfill. Keep us from worry and sadness, Mother, so that we may always rejoice like you in God your Savior and mind, your beloved Son and my dearest Lord.

The same loving peace and security that filled Mary's heart with confidence on her Annunciation day, a lifetime ago, now rests in her saddened heart on Calvary's height. Jesus' last earthly words to her have just been said. His head is bowed, His eyes are closed, mankind's Redemption has been accomplished. She holds her dead Son in her maternal embrace.

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