

Mary's vocation and our own

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Unique, yet our example

THERE are two ways of approaching the person and the life of the Blessed Virgin Mary. We may regard her as unique, and at the same time we may look upon her as our example. We may choose to emphasize what makes her different, or we may prefer to concentrate on what she shares in common with us. In no way are these two approaches mutually exclusive; on the contrary, they complement and enrich one another.

In the first place, then, the Theotokos is unique. She is, as Wordsworth said, 'our tainted nature's *solitary* boast' (my italics). In all the history of the human race only once has God become man; and so, in all the history of the human race, there is only one woman who has been chosen to be Mother of God. In her we see a unique vocation. In her we see a fullness of grace, a beauty and a holiness not to be found in any other created human person.¹ This singularity of the Holy Virgin is frequently emphasized in the liturgical texts for her different feasts. So, in the hymnography for the Feast of her Nativity (8 September), she is styled 'the only Theotokos' (106).² 'She alone brings into the world the one and only Christ,' it is affirmed. '...She is the only gateway of the Only-begotten Son of God' (101). 'Thou alone, O Sheep without blemish, from thy womb hast offered to Christ, the Lamb of God, our substance to be His fleece' (111).

Yet in the second place the Virgin Mary is also our model and example, the mirror in which we see reflected our own true face. Just as Christ is the New Adam, so Mary is the New Eve. As the New Adam, Christ discloses to us what it is to be a human person; and by the same token, Mary as the New Eve – always *under* Christ, *in* and *through* Him – manifests the true dimensions of our universal humanness. When we ask ourselves, 'Who am I? What am I?', let us look first at Jesus, and then at Mary His Mother. In the words of St Nicolas Cabasilas, Mary is *protos anthropos*, 'the first human being', in the sense that

¹ Although Christ took created human *nature*, He is not a created human *person*; for He is, on the contrary, a divine person, the eternal and uncreated Logos, the second *hypostasis* of the Holy Trinity.

² Citations from the liturgical texts for the Feast of the Nativity of the Mother of God, and for the other Marian feasts, are taken from *The Festal Menaion*, translated by Mother Mary and Archimandrite Kallistos Ware (London: Faber & Faber, 1969); the relevant page references are given in the text.

'she first and alone showed forth [human] nature';³ 'she revealed to us Man, disclosing what we were created to be'.⁴

In a Christmas sermon attributed to St Basil the Great, it is stated that the Nativity of Christ was the birthday of the entire human race.⁵ The Incarnation of the Saviour, that is to say, is a revelation not only of the divine but of the human. Christ is both true God and true man; until Christ was born, the full implications of our human personhood were still hidden from us. Christ is in this way the first real human being. In a derivative sense, under Christ, a similar affirmation may be made concerning Mary. She constitutes the ideal type of humanity, the human being *par excellence*. As G.K. Chesterton remarked, 'Men are men, but Man is a woman.'⁶ Cabasilas therefore extends the line of thought found in the Christmas Basilian Sermon: if Christ's Nativity is the birthday of humanity, in a similar manner, the Nativity of the Theotokos may be regarded as 'the birthday not of the Virgin but rather of the whole inhabited earth'.⁷

'Before I formed you in the womb....'

Today I would like to explore with you this second way of approaching the person of Mary, and to consider how she acts as our pattern and exemplar, showing us what it means to be human. Gerard Manley Hopkins saw her as 'our atmosphere'; adapting his words, we may say equally, although less rhythmically, 'Be thou then, O thou dear Mother, my *paradigm*.' How, then, do the various moments of Our Lady's life, commemorated in her major feasts, express the different aspects of our own earthly pilgrimage?

First among the major Marian feasts in the Byzantine calendar is her Nativity, celebrated on 8 September.⁸ The master theme of this celebration is VOCATION. Repeatedly in the texts for this feast it is emphasized that the vocation of the Holy Virgin to be Christ's Mother was an eternal vocation, 'from all generations' (102). The Incarnation of the Divine Logos should not be regarded as a contingency plan, adopted by God *post factum* in view of human sin, but it was God's primary purpose in creating the world. With good reason St

³ *Homily on the Nativity of the Theotokos* 4.

⁴ *Ibid.*, 6.

⁵ *On the Nativity of Christ* (PG 31: 1473A).

⁶ Quoted in W.H. Auden, *A Certain World: A Commonplace Book* (London: Faber Paperbacks, 1982), p. 243.

⁷ *Homily on the Nativity of the Theotokos* 18.

⁸ On 9 December the Orthodox Church commemorates 'The Conception by St Anne, the Mother of Theotokos'. This feast, however, is not styled 'The Immaculate Conception'; it is regarded as a feast of St Anne, rather than of Our Lady, and it is not one of the Twelve Great Feasts in the Byzantine annual calendar.

Maximos the Confessor calls the Incarnation 'the blessed end on account of which all things were created'.⁹ If God in this way predestined the human birth of His Son in His timeless counsel, then in His timeless counsel He also predestined Mary to be the Mother of His Son. What was said by God to the Prophet Jeremiah can be applied equally to the Virgin Mary: 'Before I formed you in the womb I knew you, and before you were born I consecrated you' (Jeremiah 1: 5).

This is a point that recurs throughout the hymnography for 8 September. Mary is 'the preordained tabernacle' (121), who was 'foreordained from all generations to be the habitation of the King of all and Maker, Christ our God' (102), 'foreordained before the womb as Mother of our God' (107). By extension, similar language can be applied to St Ann: she 'was foreordained from many generations to become mother of the pure Virgin' (111).

Thus far it might appear that all this indicates the uniqueness of Mary's vocation; and so indeed it does from one point of view. But, viewed in a different perspective, it appears that Mary is not only unique but is equally our model and example. For we too are each of us given from all eternity a distinctive and never-to-be-repeated vocation. We too are each of us chosen by God to fulfil some particular task, not assigned by Divine Providence to any other human person in the whole history of the world. We are each invited by God to make something beautiful in our own individual way. From all eternity God saw all of us in His divine mind, each in his or her singularity; He loves each one of us with a special love, and from each He expects something that He does not expect from anyone else.

Mary, then, is not only unique but she is also our exemplar and paradigm. If from all eternity she was assigned a unique task, then so also has God assigned from all eternity a unique task to each of us. It has been rightly said that, as regards human beings, God never does the same thing twice; moreover, the world has need of every single human person. We are not stereotypes or interchangeable counters, but each of us is different and each is special. It is the task of our lifetime to discover what is the specific and particular vocation that God has allotted to us.

⁹ *To Thalassios* 60.

Silence, freedom, offering and sharing

As we proceed further in the Church's Year, it will become clear to us that the pattern that we have discerned in the Feast of Our Lady's Birth – unique, yet our example – is to be found also in the other moments of her earthly life. Following her Nativity on 8 September, the Church commemorates in the second place her Entry into the Temple on 21 November. Here the dominant theme is SILENCE.¹⁰ As a preparation for her moment of decision at the Annunciation, Mary underwent a period of seclusion in the temple, during which she was initiated into the mystery of inner stillness. Without that preparation, without that experience of deep silence, she would not have been ready to respond as she did to Gabriel's message. She was able to conceive and bear God in her womb because through silence and secret prayer she had already discovered Him in the depths of her heart. By virtue of her years of silence in the temple, Mary may in this way be seen as the ideal hesychast. In the words of St Gregory Palamas:

It was holy stillness (*hesychia*) that guided her on her path; the stillness which signifies cessation of the intellect and of the world, forgetfulness of things below, initiation into things above, the shedding and transcending of thoughts. Such stillness is true action, the ascent to genuine contemplation or, to speak more truly, to the vision of God.... She alone among all humankind from such an early age practised stillness to a surpassing degree.... She made a new and secret road to heaven, the road – if I may so express it – of noetic silence.¹¹

Yet, while in this manner Mary's time of seclusion in the temple prepared her for her unique vocation to be God's Mother, her temple-apprenticeship serves also as a universal example. 'Man is what he does with his silence', said Friedrich von Hügel. Silence is one of the profound sources of our human existence; without silence we are not genuinely human. And it is Mary above all others who, through her Entry into the Temple, shows us the true significance of this fundamental element in our human personhood. Here, as elsewhere, she is not only unique but acts as our model and example.

The commemoration of the Entry into the Temple leads on, in the third place, to the Feast of the Annunciation (25 March). Here the keynote is FREEDOM. 'Behold, the handmaid of the Lord' (Luke 1: 38): Mary accepts her unique vocation with full freedom. She is not only chosen by God, but she herself makes a creative act of voluntary choice. She is not a passive instrument but an active participant in God's plan of salvation. She is a

¹⁰ See my article, 'The feast of Mary's silence: the entry into the Temple (21 Nov)', in Alberic Stacpoole (ed.), *Mary in Doctrine and Devotion: Papers of the Liverpool Congress, 1989*, of the Ecumenical Society of the Blessed Virgin Mary (Dublin: The Columba Press, 1990), pp. 34-41.

¹¹ *Homily 53*: 52, 53, 59.

synergos, a 'co-worker', with God (see 1 Corinthians 3: 9). In the words of St Irenaeus, 'Mary co-operates with the economy.'¹² 'The Annunciation', says Fr Sergii Bulgakov, 'manifests the maximal and definitive respect of God for creation in its freedom... The Creator asks for the creature's consent to the Incarnation.'¹³

Yet, if Mary exercised her God-given freedom of choice in a special manner when accepting her unique vocation at the moment of the Annunciation, nevertheless at that very moment she acted also as an example to us all. The freedom that she expressed when answering the Archangel is something that she shares with all of us. Just as silence is an essential element in human personhood, so also is freedom. Søren Kierkegaard was right to insist, 'The most tremendous thing granted to man is choice, freedom.'¹⁴ In His relations with human beings, God invariably respects this 'most tremendous thing': to quote the *Epistle to Diognetus*, 'God persuades, He does not compel; for violence is foreign to Him.'¹⁵ 'Grace does not coerce man', says Bulgakov.¹⁶ 'Am I not free?' asks St Paul (1 Corinthians 9 : 1). Mary provides the answer, showing us in her own person what it means to be free.

The Annunciation is followed, in the fourth place, by the Visitation, not kept by the Orthodox East as a separate feast, but observed in the West on 2 July or 31 May. Here the distinctive theme is easily discerned: SHARING. After receiving the angelic message, at once Mary goes 'with haste' – let us note this sense of urgency – to share the good news with her cousin Elizabeth (Luke 1: 39). The child that she has just conceived is a gift from God; but gifts are always meant to be shared. This meeting with Elizabeth is part of Mary's personal story, but it exemplifies equally a vital aspect in the personhood of every human being. To be a person is to share, to be in communion, to enter into relationship. This applies precisely to the quality of freedom, of which we have been speaking: it is not solitary but social. No one can be free in isolation, for freedom implies a 'Thou' as well as an 'I'. It implies vulnerability. The one who is egocentric, who excludes the other, is in reality pitifully unfree.

If this is true of freedom, then it is true also of personhood as a whole. The very word for person in Greek, *prosopon*, means literally 'face' or 'countenance': I am not a real

¹² *Against the Heresies* III, xxi, 7.

¹³ *Churchly Joy: Orthodox Devotions for the Church Year*, tr. Boris Jakim (Grand Rapids, MI/Cambridge, UK: William B. Eerdmans, 2008), p. 82.

¹⁴ *The Journals of Søren Kierkegaard*, ed. Alexander Dru (London: Oxford University Press, 1938), p. 372, §1051.

¹⁵ *Epistle to Diognetus* vii, 2.

¹⁶ *Churchly Joy*, p. 82.

person unless I 'face' others, unless I look into their eyes and allow them to look into mine. As humans we are made in the image and likeness of God, that is to say, in the image of Christ, but also in the image of the Trinity; and the Trinity signifies mutual love. Walter de la Mare envisages Napoleon as *par excellence* the one who says 'I':

'What is the world, O soldiers?
It is I :
I, this incessant snow,
This northern sky;
Soldiers, this solitude
Through which we go
Is I'¹⁷

The authentic person, standing at the opposite extreme from Napoleon, is the one who says not 'I' but 'We'. And that is exactly what Mary is doing when she goes in haste to greet Elizabeth.

On the fortieth day after the birth of the Saviour, there comes the Feast of the Presentation of Christ in the Temple or, as it is more commonly termed in the Orthodox East, the Feast of the Meeting (the meeting, that is, of Christ with His people). Here is a fifth moment in the life of Mary. In this case, the specific theme is OFFERING. Kierkegaard underlines the importance of this attitude of offering in the passage quoted earlier. Immediately after asserting that freedom is 'the most tremendous thing granted to man', he continues: 'And if you desire to save it and preserve it there is only one way: in the very same second unconditionally and in complete resignation to *give it back* to God, and yourself with it.'¹⁸ This is exactly what Mary and Joseph do after receiving their child as a gift from God. They go to the temple and offer this gift back to God the Giver, and through this act of oblation the Christ-Child becomes their own in a way that He could never otherwise have been. As C.S. Lewis says, 'Nothing that you have not given away will ever be really yours.'¹⁹ Here, once more, the Mother of God is our example: she shows us what it is to be an offerer.

Joy and Sorrow

Man was made for Joy and Woe;
And when this we rightly know
Thro' the World we safely go,
Joy & Woe are woven fine,
A clothing for the Soul divine.²⁰

¹⁷ *Collected Poems* (London: Faber & Faber, 1942), p. 57.

¹⁸ *Journals*, p. 372, §1051 (my italics).

¹⁹ *Mere Christianity* (London: Fount Paperbacks/HarperCollins, 1977), p. 189.

²⁰ 'Auguries of Innocence', in *Poetry and Prose of William Blake*, ed. Geoffrey Keynes (London: The Nonesuch Press, 1948), p. 119.

These two complementary aspects of human personhood are strikingly exemplified in the life of the Holy Virgin. Here is a sixth way in which she acts as our model.

Joy is a recurrent *motif* in all the great Marian feasts. At the Nativity of the Mother of God, it is said: 'Thy birth, O Theotokos, has brought joy to all the inhabited earth' (107); Mary is 'the Joy of all the World' (106); at her birth from the root of Jesse 'joy has put forth its flower' (106). Likewise, at the Annunciation the Archangel addresses her with the salutation *Chaire* (Luke 1 : 28). In many versions of the Bible this is translated as 'Hail' or, more flat-footedly, 'Greetings'. But the true meaning of the Greek is much more emphatic: 'Rejoice'. What Gabriel brings is great joy. Mary in her turn transmits joy to her cousin Elizabeth at the Visitation:

My soul magnifies the Lord,
and my spirit rejoices in God my Saviour (Luke 1: 47).

Joy is equally a theme in the iconography of the Virgin. There are two Marian icons whose titles I value especially: 'Joy of all who Sorrow' and 'Theotokos of unexpected joy'.

Nevertheless joy, as Blake warns us, is 'woven fine' with sorrow, and such is precisely the experience of Mary. Already at the Presentation in the Temple Symeon warns her of the sorrow that is to come: 'A sword will pierce your own soul too' (Luke 2: 35). Indeed, any act of offering, if it is to be fully such, has to be not only joyful but sacrificial: as David said to Araunah, 'I will not offer to the Lord My God that which cost me nothing' (1 Samuel 24: 24). Symeon's prophecy comes to its realization when Mary stands at the foot of the Cross, and her grief at that moment is movingly expressed in the Church's hymnography on Holy Friday. At Compline on that day there is sung a 'Lamentation of the Most Holy Theotokos' by Symeon the Logothete, the Orthodox equivalent to Jacopone da Todi's *Stabat Mater*. I quote two typical stanzas from this:

'How am I deprived of Him who is my hope, my joy, my gladness, of my Son and God. Woe is me! My heart is filled with anguish', said the All-Pure weeping.

'Where, O my Son and God, are the good tidings of the Annunciation that Gabriel brought me? He called Thee King and God and Son of the Most High; and now, O my sweet Light, I behold Thee naked, wounded, lifeless.'²¹

²¹ *The Lenten Triodion*, tr. Mother Mary and Archimandrite Kallistos Ware (London & Boston: Faber & Faber, 1978), pp. 617, 620.

Among modern Orthodox writers, St Silouan of Athos has written with particular eloquence about Mary's sorrow:

Never by a single thought did the Mother of God sin, nor did she ever lose grace, yet vast were her sorrows; when she stood at the foot of the Cross her grief was as boundless as the ocean and her soul knew torment incomparably worse than Adam's when he was driven from paradise... We cannot attain to the full the love of the Mother of God, and so we cannot thoroughly comprehend her grief. Her love was complete.²²

Such, then, is the way in which Mary's life embodies, to a pre-eminent degree, the mingled joy and sorrow present in the experience of every human person who lives their own life to the full.

Beyond death and judgement

There remains finally, in the seventh place, the last event in the earthly journey of the Theotokos, when she passes from history into eternity: her Dormition (Falling Asleep), as it is usually known in the Orthodox East, or Assumption, as it is termed in the West, celebrated by both East and West on 15 August. The *leitmotif* of the Feast is RESURRECTION GLORY. Here, in a particularly evident fashion, the Marian antinomy is applicable: unique, yet our example. From one point of view, her bodily glorification is certainly unique. She alone, among all the members of the Church, has already passed beyond death and judgement. She alone, among all the members of the Church, dwells already in the glory of the Age to come with the integral totality of her personhood, body and soul together. In her case alone has the eschatological resurrection of the body been anticipated. Between the first and the second coming of Christ, to no one else has this bodily glorification been granted.²³

From another perspective, however, she is not only unique but our example. The bodily resurrection, which has in her case been exceptionally anticipated, is at the same time something that awaits all of us, by God's mercy, at the Parousia. It is our common vocation. In that glory where she dwells even now – body and soul together – we also hope eventually to share, with our bodies as well as our souls. She indicates the path that we are all of us invited to follow. She is the firstfruits; we are called to be the harvest. Foretelling His Ascension, Jesus said to His disciples at the Last Supper: 'I go to prepare a

²² Archimandrite Sophrony (Sakharov), *Saint Silouan the Athonite* (Tolleshunt Knights, Essex: Stavropegic Monastery of St John the Baptist, 1991), p. 390.

²³ I do not here discuss the cases of Enoch and Elijah in the Old Covenant. The legend that St John the Theologian (the Evangelist) was received physically into heaven lacks firm basis in tradition.

place for you' (John 14: 2). Under Christ, Mary also affirms the same thing at her own ascension into heaven: she likewise goes to prepare a place for us. In her glorified person, she sums up the future hope of all humankind. If we ask, 'What is my journey's end?', the answer is clear: look at Mary.

In these seven ways, then, Mary sets before us what it is to be a human person after the image and likeness of God. Reflecting on her example, we recognize the marvellous potentialities of our created personhood. 'I will give thanks unto Thee, for I am fearfully and wonderfully made' (Psalm 139: 3).