



LIGHT & LIFE

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BEHOLD MAN!

By Fr. Brian Mullady, O.P.

“You who have been raised with Christ, set your heart on higher things where Christ reigns at the right hand of God the Father.” (Col. 3:1) An ancient source says: “Man stands in the middle of creation, on the horizon of being, between flesh and spirit, between time and eternity.” Human beings have both flesh (a body) and a spirit (the spiritual soul).

The problem of man first involves the soul which is a spirit. What good can fulfill the soul? After long reflection even some pagan philosophers held that because of the presence of the intelligence in a human being, only knowledge of the highest and most all-encompassing cause of the world could still the wonder which begins in a child the first time he asks: “Why?” In Christianity, we know this to be God. Only the direct knowledge of God himself can still the dynamism of the intellect to know the truth. This is human perfection and happiness. Thomas Aquinas put it this way: “quite apparent in this conclusion is the fact that ultimate felicity is to be sought in nothing other than an operation of the intellect, since no desire carries on to such sublime heights as the desire to understand the truth. Indeed, all our desires for pleasure, or other things of this sort that are craved by men, can be satisfied with other things, but the aforementioned desire does not rest until it reaches God, the highest point of reference for, and the maker of, things. Let those men be ashamed, then, who seek man’s felicity in the most inferior things, when it is so highly situated.” (*Summa contra Gentiles*, III, 50)

Once this is established as the perfection of our souls, the natural question arises as to the place of the body is this. The soul and the body are really distinct from one another. Our souls are set on the highest realms. What about the body? Matter tends to corruption and the mystery and fear of death are central experiences of human life. They compound the problem of man. If the soul lives forever and even sees God, it is an unnatural

condition if the body could not share in that, unless the body were not essential to human life.

Plato was puzzled by this fact and this led him to posit that the body was a prison into which souls fell. He thought the soul existed before human birth in a body and struggled to constantly be free from matter to soar. There would have been no question or need for the resurrection from the dead, the Easter event, for Plato.



The Incredulity of St Thomas
Peter Paul Rubens - 1615

Aristotle, on the other hand, though he accepted that knowledge was spiritual, thought that common experience should teach us that our soul was a blank slate at birth and input to our intelligence only came in this life through sense experience beginning in the body. Yet again there was a conundrum. The soul lived forever, but his experience of all bodies is that they died. Again, unnatural! Human reason could not solve this problem and this disproves all modern tendencies to think that human beings can solve every mystery for this is one which eludes even the most intelligent. Life becomes absurd, the

meaning of which we create ourselves in the relativity of truth.

When Our Lord rises from the dead, like the ring to a finger, the box canyon of human absurdity is resolved. When he appears to Mary Magdalen and in the Upper Room to the Apostles, he invites them to believe and in some cases to touch. He proves it is really him in his own body by eating a piece of fish and inviting them to place their hands in the print of the nails.

Pilate represented the absurdity of modern life oddly enough when in the Praetorium he pointed to the scourged Christ crowned with thorns and said: “Ecce Homo!” (Behold man) In the Upper Room, Christ wishes the Apostles peace and through the passion and forgiveness of sins says also: “Behold Man!” This is what the final meaning of human life is.

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TO BE OFFERED FOR YOUR INTENTIONS

THEOLOGY FOR THE LAITY

Discipleship, Part 2

Mary Mother and Model of Disciples

By Fr. Michael Fones, O.P.

Jesus, the material incarnation of the Second Person of the Trinity, asks of us what God demanded of His Chosen People in the *Shema* prayed each morning and evening by the pious Jew: to “love the LORD, your God, with your whole heart, and with your whole being, and with your whole strength.”¹ Not only do we fall short of this ideal, we tend to soften the demands of discipleship, “domesticating” it until we consider discipleship to consist of occasional prayer, fulfilling our Sunday obligation, and annual confession.

What, then, are some of the characteristic attitudes and behaviors of the disciple? No better answer can be found than by looking to Our Lady. Pope Paul VI, in his apostolic exhortation *Marialis Cultis*, wrote that Mary is the “first and the most perfect of Christ’s disciples” because “in her own particular life, she fully and responsibly accepted the will of God (cf. Lk. 1:38).”² The Joyful Mysteries of the Most Holy Rosary focus in a particular way on Our Lady’s attitudes and behaviors. In the fifteenth chapter of John, Jesus promises his disciples that by obeying his commandments, “my joy may be in you and your joy may be complete.” These mysteries are joyful precisely because they demonstrate the obedience of Our Lady’s discipleship to God the Father, long before her Son begins his public ministry. Then she will become his disciple; but the joy Jesus promises his disciples has already manifested in her life, as highlighted in these five moments.

THE ANNUNCIATION

When the Archangel Gabriel appears before the virgin and announces that God the Father has chosen her to be the mother of his incarnate Son, we find an essential attitude of a disciple: the willingness to do God’s will, even when that brings great personal risk. The Blessed Mother had no way of knowing how Joseph, her betrothed, would respond to the news of her pregnancy. One distinct possibility, since Joseph was a devout Jew³, could have been death by stoning⁴.

When we look at Scripture, we find that every call from God looks risky! Noah is asked to build a huge ark *before* the rainclouds gather. Moses fled Egypt because he murdered a man. When God appears in the burning bush, for good reason Moses spends the better part of two chapters in Exodus⁵ arguing that someone else should go to the Israelites and Pharaoh! Gideon, the most insignificant person in his tribe, is sent by God with

only 300 men to conquer the Midianites⁶. Normally God’s instructions are not so obvious as an angelic messenger. Still, the lives of the saints are filled with God-inspired actions they took against the better judgment of their family, peers, or culture. The encounter with God, whether mystical or sacramental, always results in a call to trust, to conversion, and to mission.

What behavior of the disciple is found in the Annunciation? Mary would seem to be utterly passive. But the Christian imagination offers a suggestion. The accompanying image is from a cell from the Dominican priory of San Marco in Florence in which Bl. Fra Angelico painted a depiction of the Annunciation. He included a small book in the virgin’s right hand. A tradition developed that Mary was pouring over the psalms when Gabriel arrived; or perhaps studying the passage in Isaiah, chapter 7, in which King Ahaz is given the sign that “a virgin shall conceive, and bear a son.”

Study is an essential part of being a disciple, a word whose Latin origin means “student” or “follower”. St. Thomas Aquinas observed that love follows upon knowledge; that the more we know of someone, the more readily we can love them. Since we naturally trust those we love, the more we know and love about God, the easier it is to trust Him and His will. The studying that prepares us for a career can be a holy endeavor if we desire to put that knowledge at the service of others. But the common object of study for every disciple is the scriptures and the truths of our faith ultimately derived from them. God’s Word, once mediated in the flesh, is mediated through inspired authors and allows us to know, and thus love, Mary’s Son.⁷

Study of scripture may help us know about Christ, but there is also a lived experience of Him, as well. In his Christmas address to the Roman curia in 2007, Pope Benedict XVI told them,

One can never know Christ only theoretically. With great teaching one can know everything about the sacred scriptures without ever having met him. Journeying with him is an integral part of knowing him, of entering his sentiments, as the Letter to the Philippians (2:5) says...The encounter with Jesus Christ requires listening, requires a response in prayer and in putting into practice what he tells us... Becoming disciples of Christ is thus an educational journey towards our true being, towards the proper way of being human.⁸

We see this movement from listening to action in Mary’s journey to her cousin Elizabeth.

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THE VISITATION

Following Jesus as a disciple is like hiking behind a friend in the forest on a moonless night. We are in darkness. We do not know what lies ahead, and dimly make out the next step as he leads us. Mary does not seem to fret over what her *fiat* means in the long run. Gabriel has revealed that her cousin, older and assumed to be barren, is six months pregnant, so Mary rushes to help her. The disciple knows her life is not about herself, but about serving others.

The greeting and blessing she receives from Elizabeth inspire Mary's response, the *Magnificat*. It is replete with allusions and direct quotations from a rich variety of Hebrew scriptures, including twelve of the psalms⁹, the prophets Isaiah and Jeremiah, 1st and 2nd Samuel, 2nd Kings, Deuteronomy, and the wisdom of Sirach. However historical critics wish to interpret the construction of this text, Luke implies that the Hebrew scriptures were deeply ingrained in the mind and heart of Our Lady – a result of her study and prayer. She remains three months, and the early readers of the Gospel would have had no difficulty imagining the many ways Mary assisted her cousin until John was born.

THE NATIVITY OF OUR LORD AND SAVIOR

I wonder what emotions the Blessed Mother experienced as she and Joseph discovered there was no shelter for them in Bethlehem, swollen with people returning to be counted in a census. Were there no relatives of Joseph in the village, or were their doors also closed, perhaps because of Mary's untimely pregnancy? I believe one of the hallmarks of a disciple is continued trust in God, even when the events of our life do not match our expectations. Wouldn't Mary have expected to give birth in her home, supported by family, rather than a strange village, surrounded by animals?

The disciple who has placed his or her trust in God believes that He continues to be at work in the unexpected, and learns to reflect on the events, and to patiently act within and through them with prayer, not despair. Years later, we may have a new appreciation for events that once disappointed us. After her Son's death and resurrection, perhaps Mary pondered anew on the events of his birth, remembering him, swaddled and immobilized in cloths, like the lambs destined for the nearby temple of Jerusalem, swaddled at birth for a little while to prevent them from falling and becoming scarred and unfit for sacrifice. This kind of reflection on the events of our life, whether momentous or seemingly insignificant, is very much a part of discipleship when, in spite of disappointment, we continue to respond in faith and seek meaning in the events of our lives.

When we respond in faith and accept disappointment and still act as best we are able in accord with God's will, we become caught up in the great providential river that is the story of the ongoing redemption of the world. This can be powerfully so when tragedy strikes. While God gives us freedom to commit evil, he also gives us

the freedom to respond to evil with actions inspired by grace.

Outside the town of Bodega Bay, California, is a small tower bearing dozens of small- to medium-sized bells donated from individuals, churches and schools in Italy in memory of a little boy. Nicholas Green, age 7, was killed in 1994 in a robbery while on vacation in southern Italy with his parents. Heartbroken, they donated his organs and corneas without bitterness, benefitting seven Italians, including four teenagers. This generosity generated the "Nicholas Effect": a three-fold increase in organ donations in Italy, which formerly had one of the lowest rates of organ donations in Europe. A foundation¹⁰ begun by Nicholas' parents promotes organ donations and has saved thousands of lives.

THE PRESENTATION

According to the law of Moses, Joseph and Mary took the newborn Jesus to Jerusalem where, as a first-born son, he was "consecrated to the Lord".¹¹ Mary had received him into her womb as a complete gift from the Father, and in this moment she and her husband acknowledge the gift. This is an important attitude of the disciple. If everything we have and are has been received from God, ultimately everything we have and are *belongs* to God. The injunction to love God "with your whole heart, and with your whole being, and with your whole strength" is not an impossible command, but a recognition of reality and an invitation to live in accord with that reality. When we do so, every good thing we do can be offered to God as a sacrifice of praise.

The Church's teaching on the laity indicates that for those who love God with all their being, everyday activities take on a supernatural, spiritual significance as an exercise of the shared priesthood with Christ, and thus are intimately connected to liturgical worship. The Fathers of the Second Vatican Council wrote of the laity that,

All their works, prayers and apostolic endeavors, their ordinary married and family life, their daily occupations, their physical and mental relaxation, if carried out in the Spirit, and even the hardships of life, if patiently borne—all these become "spiritual sacrifices acceptable to God through Jesus Christ". Together with the offering of the Lord's body, they are most fittingly offered in the celebration of the Eucharist. Thus, as those everywhere who adore in holy activity, the laity consecrate the world itself to God.¹²

THE FINDING IN THE TEMPLE

Finally, St. Luke tells us that Joseph and Mary celebrated Passover every year in Jerusalem.¹³ This mystery occurs because Mary and Joseph identified themselves as part of a holy people, a nation set apart by God, redeemed from slavery, and intended to be a light to all the nations.¹⁴ That, too, is part of the attitude of a disciple; a desire for holiness, gratitude for forgiveness, and a certitude that

the greatest service we can give to another is to bring them to Christ.

To achieve this, disciples have a desire to be part of a community with other disciples. Following Jesus is a great adventure requiring conscious daily decisions. Many of those decisions will be opposed by those who are not disciples, as Jesus promises.¹⁵ We need the support and example of others who are on the same journey, who know the same Master. We encounter Jesus in our sharing of scripture, in “the least of our brothers and sisters”¹⁶ whom we serve, in the sacraments, and through fellow disciples. As Pope Francis has pointed out, “It is through our brothers and sisters with their gifts and their limits, that he [Jesus] comes to us and makes himself known. This is what belonging to the Church means.”¹⁷

The community of disciples is not only supportive, it is essential to the mission given the Church by Jesus, in which the laity are co-responsible with the clergy. Jesus drew a community to himself, then sent them to continue his ministry with the power of the Holy Spirit. He tells his disciples very solemnly at the Last Supper, “whoever believes in me will do the works that I do, and will do greater ones than these, because I am going to the Father.”¹⁸ The spiritual gifts given to each disciple at their baptism are the means by which they participate in that mission of making disciples of all nations. They are what makes each disciple a unique member of the Body of Christ under the leadership and guidance of Jesus, the Head.

In his apostolic exhortation on Mary, Pope Paul VI provided a pithy summary of Mary as a model for disciples when he wrote,

“the figure of the Blessed Virgin does not disillusion any of the profound expectations of the men and women of our time but offers them the perfect model of the disciple of the Lord: the disciple who builds up the earthly and temporal city while being a diligent pilgrim towards the heavenly and eternal city; the disciple who works for that justice which sets free the oppressed and for that charity which assists the needy; but above all, the disciple who is the active witness of that love which builds up Christ in people's hearts.”¹⁹

While we look to Mary as a model of discipleship, we must also rely on her intercession to help us love her Son as she did. She who was given to us as mother by Jesus always points to him²⁰, the source of salvation for all her children. ■

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1. Deuteronomy 6:5
 2. *Marialis Cultis*, 35
 3. Matthew 1:19
 4. Deuteronomy 22:21-23
 5. Exodus 3-4
 6. Judges 6-8
 7. Faith seeks understanding: it is intrinsic to faith that a believer desires to know better the One in whom he has put his faith, and to understand better what He has revealed; a more penetrating knowledge will in turn call forth a greater faith, increasingly set afire by love. [*Catechism of the Catholic Church*, 158]

8. *Address of His Holiness Benedict XVI to the members of the Roman curia at the traditional exchange of Christmas greetings, 2007.*
9. Psalm 17; 35:9; 71:19; 89:2, 10; 98:3; 103:13, 107:9; 111:9; 113:7; 118:15; 126:2-3; 147:6. It is not surprising, then, that traditionally Mary was assumed to have been praying the psalms when Gabriel appeared!
10. <https://nicholasgreen.org>
11. Luke 2:23
12. Dogmatic Constitution on the Church, *Lumen Gentium*, 34.
13. Luke 2:41.
14. Isaiah 42:6; 49:6; 60:3
15. John 15:20, “If they persecuted me, they will also persecute you.”
16. Matthew 25:40.
17. Pope Francis, Wednesday General Audience, June 25, 2014.
18. John 14:12.
19. *Marialis Cultis*, 37
20. The icon is an example of a *Hodegetria Maria* icon, from the Greek, “she who points the way.”

Behold Man! (Continued from page 1)

For those of us who meditate on the mysteries of the Rosary, the resurrection is one of the most important. There is a pious tradition which the Filipino community celebrates that though the Gospels are silent on this subject, the first person to whom Our Lord showed his risen body was Our Lady. John Paul II reflects on this in one of his Wednesday audience conferences:

A fifth-century author, Sedulius, maintains that in the splendor of his risen life Christ first showed himself to his mother. In fact, she, who at the Annunciation was the way he entered the world, was called to spread the marvelous news of the Resurrection in order to become the herald of his glorious coming. Thus bathed in the glory of the Risen One, she anticipates the Church's splendor. Cf. Sedulius, *Paschale carmen*, 5, 357-364, (CSEL 10, 140f).

(May 21, 1997)

As Mary met Jesus first in her Annunciation and then was a part of all the actions of his life because his body came from her, this final experience must be the most important both to her and to us. Now all the mysteries are made clear and the purpose of Christ's life and death are fulfilled. The world was created for the glorification of God in Christ and we are created to set our hearts on the higher realms. Not only our hearts and souls, but also our bodies.

It is true on earth each must wait until after death for this most complete of experiences, but as Mary did in faith we can anticipate this by both prayer and deed. We can ask her continued intercession in seeing the world from the perspective of eternity and grace. Thus we can prepare for our own resurrection first of soul through grace but then of body in the general resurrection. Behold Man! ■

Note from the Director

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Fr. Joseph Sergott, O.P.