

St. Mary's Cathedral - Patron Day Liturgy, Immaculate Conception, December 8th, 2006

The Swiss theologian Hans Urs von Balthasar suggests that the Church in every age is formed in the image of the great figures of the New Testament. The Church of proclamation and evangelization, for example, is formed in the image of St. Paul, the great apostle of the Gentiles. The Church of contemplation and mystical insight is constantly being formed in the image of the apostle John, the beloved disciple who rested his head on the Lord's chest at the Last Supper. The Church of authority is formed in the image of Peter, to whom Christ gave the power of the keys, the power to bind and loose, and the parallel injunction to "*strengthen your brethren*" And the Church of discipleship—which is the basis of everything else—is formed in the image of a woman, Mary, who is the first of disciples and thus the mother of the Church.

Through Mary's fiat,—"***Be it done unto me according to your word***" —, we glimpse one of the primary lessons of discipleship, a lesson it takes a lifetime to learn: **we are not in charge of our lives— God is in charge of our lives.** To know that is to be liberated in the truest sense of human freedom. To know that is to be set free from the restlessness that besets every human heart in every age.

Mary teaches us to **trust:** in God's wisdom, which so often contradicts the "evidence" about ourselves, and the "evidence" about the world and its fate. To enter into the mystery of the Blessed Virgin Mary is to take our first steps in the spiritual discipline of trust.

The Gospel tells us that Mary found the angel's greeting "troubling." And why not? But Mary's response amid her fears and doubts— Mary's *fiat*—vindicates the angel's greeting, that she is "***full of grace.***"

Mary doesn't negotiate. She doesn't ask for a pre-maternal contract, unlike today's couples with their "prenuptial agreements." Mary doesn't have an exit strategy. Mary doesn't "keep her options open." In fear and trembling, but with confidence in God's saving purposes, she gives the answer: *fiat*. Let it be. I am the Lord's servant and the Lord will provide.

"Keeping your options open" is not the path to happiness, wholeness—or holiness. That's an important Marian insight from the New Testament for every generation.

We've all heard, time and again, that today we are "not ready to commit." Is that because we short on trust? If so, it's not hard to understand why. We've seen the wreckage caused by the sexual revolution and its dissolution of trust between men and women, both within marriage and outside of it. We've seen public officials betray their oath of office, and priests and bishops betray the vows they swore to Christ and the Church at ordination. We've seen teachers and professors betray the truth because of expediency, cowardice, or an addiction to political correctness.

If we find it hard to trust, and thus hard to "commit," that's understandable.

But not persuasive for a disciple. "*Be it done unto me according to your word*"

Deus Caritas Est

41. Outstanding among the saints is Mary, Mother of the Lord and mirror of all holiness. In the Gospel of Luke we find her engaged in a **service of charity** to her cousin Elizabeth, with whom she remained for “about three months” (1:56) so as to assist her in the final phase of her pregnancy. ... she says on the occasion of that visit, “My soul magnifies the Lord” (*Lk* 1:46). In these words she expresses her whole programme of life: not setting herself at the centre, but leaving space for God, who is encountered both in prayer and in service of neighbour—only then does goodness enter the world. Mary's greatness consists in the fact that she wants to magnify God, not herself. She is lowly: her only desire is to be the handmaid of the Lord (cf. *Lk* 1:38, 48). She knows that she will only contribute to the salvation of the world if, rather than carrying out her own projects, she places herself completely at the disposal of God's initiatives.

Mary is a woman of hope: only because she believes in God's promises and awaits the salvation of Israel, can the angel visit her and call her to the decisive service of these promises.

Mary is a woman of faith: “Blessed are you who believed”, Elizabeth says to her (cf. *Lk* 1:45). The *Magnificat*—a portrait, so to speak, of her soul—is entirely woven from threads of Holy Scripture, threads drawn from the Word of God. Here we see how completely at home Mary is with the Word of God, with ease she moves in and out of it. She speaks and thinks with the Word of God; the Word of God becomes her word, and her word issues from the Word of God. Here we see how her thoughts are attuned to the thoughts of God, how her will is one with the will of God. Since Mary is completely imbued with the Word of God, she is able to become the Mother of the Word Incarnate.

Finally, **Mary is a woman who loves.** How could it be otherwise? As a believer who in faith thinks with God's thoughts and wills with God's will, she cannot fail to be a woman who loves. We sense this in her quiet gestures, as recounted by the infancy narratives in the Gospel. We see it in the delicacy with which she recognizes the need of the spouses at Cana and makes it known to Jesus. We see it in the humility with which she recedes into the background during Jesus' public life, knowing that the Son must establish a new family and that the Mother's hour will come only with the Cross, which will be Jesus' true hour (cf. *Jn* 2:4; 13:1). When the disciples flee, Mary will remain beneath the Cross (cf. *Jn* 19:25-27); later, at the hour of Pentecost, it will be they who gather around her as they wait for the Holy Spirit (cf. *Acts* 1:14).

The real good news is that the Incarnation continues, as the Word of God is enfleshed each day in the heart and mind, speech and actions, of his disciples. The fundamental question posed to us, the answer to which gives us an identity, vocation, and mission is the same one posed to her at the Annunciation:

Will you give flesh to the Son of God?
Will the divine become human through you?
Will you provide God the Son with a human nature?