

## ABSTRACT

Bearing God, Echoing the Word: Mary as Contemplative Exemplar

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Mary, the Mother of God, is offered in Scripture as a model of prayer after which contemplatives may shape their own prayers. This thesis exegetes Scripture passages involving Mary, and enters into dialogue with numerous Catholic and Protestant theologians throughout time. In doing so, it demonstrates how Christ offers his mother to his Church as a contemplative ideal, and then identifies and analyzes the contemplative virtues that Mary embodies: her selfless and obedient reception of the Word of God, her quiet pondering of its mysteries, her faithfulness in bearing it into the world, and her self-emptying perseverance and humility. These virtues are applied to the contemplative act and presented as ideals in prayer. Finally, this thesis turns to the contemplative action of the whole Christian Church, illuminating how the prayers of each contemplative are connected to the prayer of the whole Church, and arguing that because of this dynamic connection the praying Church takes the contemplative form of the Mother of God.

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BEARING GOD, ECHOING THE WORD: MARY AS CONTEMPLATIVE  
EXEMPLAR

A Thesis Submitted to the Faculty of  
Baylor University  
In Partial Fulfillment of the Requirements for the  
Honors Program

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Waco, Texas

May, 2012

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## PREFACE

Prayer is a facet of the Christian life that both vexes and blesses the believer. The idea of prayer brings to mind well-worn blessings over meals, tearful bedside confessions, communities gathering to converse as a singular voice with their God, and many other moments in which human beings turn their hearts and minds heavenwards. Prayer itself, ideally, brings the Christian into a mindful and affective correspondence with the Triune God. Many Christians not only acknowledge the duty of prayer, but the necessity of it. It seems to address a deep-seated yearning for communion with the Holy. Every Christian seeking to fulfill this yearning and to answer this calling is, to some degree, a contemplative.

Yet the frustration many face is the question of *How?* This seems to echo the disciple's plea, "Lord, teach us to pray..." (Luke 11:1-3a, KJV). Books of devotion and composed prayers offer only what Hans Urs von Balthasar calls "spiritual reading" – observing and echoing the devotion of another, without producing the contemplation that should grow from our own souls. This is another's encounter with the Word of God, not the present believer's encounter with the Word of God in prayer. As beneficial as it may be, there is no substitute for devotion offered in spirit and in truth.

Yet, in Scripture, there is one human woman who encounters God with an intimacy unknown to her predecessors: Mary, the Mother of Christ. Though only one of her prayers is reproduced – the worshipful adoration of her Magnificat – her person is imitable for the Christian's prayers. These following pages seek to elucidate both that Jesus himself commends his mother to his followers as a model, and examine the virtues

that Mary displays in her actions as they relate to the contemplative life. This is not “spiritual reading,” for I do not propose simply parroting the prayer of Mary. Instead, I suggest that the Christian should value her as an exemplar, encountering a graceful contemplative, and learn from her person how better to pray. Interestingly, this very act – reflecting upon the words of Scripture – is the first step in contemplation.

Finally, the shape of the believers’ prayers forms their praying community. Ecclesiology and devotion are inseparable. It is my suggestion that, in pursuing the Marian ideal of prayer, Christians of all sorts may find themselves aware of a greater unity than they knew existed between them in offering the great unity and devotion of those words, “Our Father...”

*This work is dedicated to the unknown and unsung saints and martyrs. Their faithfulness, sacrifice, and love are recorded only in the book of Heaven, and in the hearts of those whom they blessed.*

*They too shall have a crown.*

## CHAPTER ONE

“Teach us to pray...”

### *Mary: Exemplar in Prayer*

The Gospel of Luke opens with the oft told and retold Christmas narrative. While Matthew’s Christmas story, which comes after a genealogy of Jesus, begins immediately with Mary’s miraculous pregnancy and features an annunciation only to Joseph (Mark omits the story entirely and John simply offers, “the Word became flesh”), Luke’s telling is paced over two chapters and begins with the miraculous pregnancy of Mary’s cousin, Elizabeth (Luke 1:5-25). Luke’s well-crafted narrative paints Mary with the most clarity and detail of all Scripture. He reveals her to be a chaste virgin (1:27), a prudent ponderer (1:29), an obedient maiden (1:38), and a poet (1:46-55).

In addition to revealing more about Mary than the other Gospels, the Lucan narrative also contains more instances of Jesus praying. However, the increased frequency of these mentions does little to dispel the mystery that surrounds them, for Luke most often writes of Jesus “praying alone” (9:18 ESV): we are told that Jesus “would withdraw to desolate places and pray” (5:16), and that at least one time he “went out to the mountain to pray, and all night he continued in prayer to God” (6:12), a practice that may have been common as “his custom” (22:39). Compared to the greater prevalence of Jesus’ prayerful devotion, and frequent commands *to* pray, Jesus gives surprisingly little instruction on *how* to pray. He is recorded instructing his disciples directly about prayer only in chapter 11, and then delivering two parables concerning prayer in 18:1-17.



Instead of detailed instruction in prayerful devotion in Scripture, the Incarnate God gave his disciples an exemplar, an ideal to imitate in forming their own prayers. This, I want to argue in these pages, is none other than Christ's own mother. All Christians since, as inheritors of the same faith and fellow disciples of Jesus, also receive Mary as their model. The Word of God praises her by lips of angels within Scripture, and by the words of Scripture she is revealed to embody the ideal qualities of a believer at prayer. Every Christian should, in this light, seek to follow the ideal of prayer shown in Mary, the Mother of Christ.

The mentality Christians adopt in relation to Mary is a highly divisive theological issue. Protestants may accuse Catholics of excessive reverence, of overtly deifying her, of crafting superfluous doctrines that unnecessarily exalt this woman. Some would prefer her to remain "a character in the Christmas story," slipping "into our consciousness along with the Advent wreath."<sup>1</sup> Catholics may, in turn, then accuse Protestants of belittling Mary's role in the history of salvation as nothing more than a means, a medium, the substance God used to take on flesh, not entirely unlike the "dust of the ground" out of which He fashioned Adam (Gen. 2:7 KJV). For this reason, I intentionally *will not* address most of the doctrines contested by many Protestants (e.g. the Assumption of Mary, Mary as Queen of Heaven, the Immaculate Conception of Mary, etc.). I *will* present Mary as the model contemplative, one who displays such virtues in prayer and meditation that every praying Christian ought to seek her ideal. This is not a new regard for Mary. As David Lyle Jeffrey notes:

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<sup>1</sup> Beverly Roberts Gaventa, "Standing Near the Cross: Mary and the Crucifixion of Jesus," in *Blessed One: Protestant Perspectives on Mary*, ed. Beverly Roberts Gaventa and Cynthia L. Rigby (Louisville: Westminster John Knox Press, 2002), 47. A generalization, perhaps, but not an altogether unfair one.

In many Renaissance paintings the Angel Gabriel finds her reading the Bible. It is historically unlikely that Mary would have had access to a scroll of Torah. Yet artists seeking to symbolize her faithfulness pictured her as a careful student of the Word of God. This attentiveness to God's written Word was not only a sign of her obedience, pious artists thought, but also a preparation for her coming role as the receptacle for his Word made flesh in Jesus. Moreover, Mary's supposed study of Scripture would make her a model for all those who would seek to harbor Christ in themselves.<sup>2</sup>

### *The Biblical Case*

#### *Joy and Favor*

The greatest evidence for Mary as an exemplary believer and contemplative comes from Luke's telling of the Annunciation to Mary, Mary's Visitation to Elizabeth, and the Nativity of Christ. The angel Gabriel comes to Mary to announce her miraculous pregnancy, but this is unique, even for angelic visits. He previously came to Zacharias, Elizabeth's husband and the head of the family (Luke 1:11). In Matthew's Gospel he later appears to Joseph as well, but in a dream (Matt. 1:20). The fact that Mary, the betrothed virgin, receives a personal angelic visit in and of itself is noteworthy.

Gabriel "proclaims joy to the Virgin" with his first greeting of "Hail" (1:28, KJV).<sup>3</sup> In Greek, the greeting Gabriel uses is *chaire* (Χαῖρε), which is both a greeting and an imperative literally meaning "Rejoice!" or "Be glad!" After setting this joyous and reverential tone, he then praises her, calling her *kecharitōmenē* (κεχαριτωμένη), she is one to whom grace/favor has been shown. The King James Version reads: "thou art highly favoured, the Lord is with thee: blessed art thou among women" (1:28, KJV).

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<sup>2</sup> David Lyle Jeffrey, "Hail Mary," *Christian History* 83 (2004): <http://www.christianitytoday.com/ch/2004/issue83/6.16.html>.

<sup>3</sup> Gregory of Nyssa and St. Thomas Aquinas, *Catena Aurea, Vol. III: St. Luke*, trans. and ed. John Henry Cardinal Newman (London: The Saint Austin Press, 1999), 26.

Both *chaire* and *kecharitōmenē* come “from the same root as the words joy and rejoice (*chara, chairein*) ... Joy comes from grace” and “grace is joy.”<sup>4</sup> There is thus a connection, linguistically and spiritually, between the grace she has been shown (and shows in her faith) and Gabriel’s present hailing of her, bidding her to rejoice. The bestowed grace implies a relationship: “it does not predicate something about an I, but something about a connection between I and Thou, between God and man.”<sup>5</sup> Thus follows, *ho kurios meta sou* (ὁ κύριος μετὰ σοῦ) – “the Lord is with thee.” God, in his fullness, precedes His messenger by filling Mary with grace before her blessedness is proclaimed.<sup>6</sup> The Christian reader should not underestimate the shock of such a greeting, which troubles and confuses Mary. For Mary, a Jew, burning bushes, pillars of fire, great clouds, earthquakes, or the extremely sacred Holy of Holies mark the presence of the Holy God of Israel. However, the angel tells her that God is with *her*; even before her conception she “is intimately connected with God.”<sup>7</sup> Holiness so great that it may bring death (2 Sam. 6:6-7) instead brings life and life eternal.<sup>8</sup>

God’s messenger praises Mary before her pregnancy, thus she is not blessed for the coming fruit of her womb alone, but as a faithful woman. As Joel B. Green notes, “Luke makes it clear that it is not because of Mary’s motherhood” that she merits divine

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<sup>4</sup> Hans Urs von Balthasar and Joseph Cardinal Ratzinger, *Mary: The Church at the Source*, trans. Adrian Walker (San Francisco: Ignatius Press, 2005), 67.

<sup>5</sup> Ibid.

<sup>6</sup> Jerome and Aquinas, *Catena Aurea, Vol. III*, 27.

<sup>7</sup> von Balthasar and Ratzinger, *Church at the Source*, 67.

<sup>8</sup> See also Exodus 19:10-24 and Numbers 4:15.

fortune.<sup>9</sup> Rather, her “pregnancy is the consequence of her blessedness, not its cause.”<sup>10</sup> The verb tenses in the following verses make this apparent: “And the angel said to her, ‘Do not be afraid, Mary, for you *have found* favor with God. And behold, you *will conceive* in your womb and bear a son, and you shall call his name Jesus.’” (1:30-31 ESV, emphasis added). The first verb is in the aorist tense in the Greek (*eures*, εὔρες) – Mary has already found favor with God. However, in referring to her coming pregnancy, Gabriel uses the future tense (*syllēmpsēi*, συλλήμψῃ).<sup>11</sup>

Green also notes that Mary is not favored or honored for any social standing, lineage, or worldly honor: “With other characters in Luke’s birth account – including Zechariah, Elizabeth, Joseph, Simeon, and Anna – stature is marked in terms of pedigree and by references to unassailable character (1:5-7, 27; 2:4, 25-27, 36-37), both typical measures of social standing in most any world.”<sup>12</sup> Zechariah and Elizabeth are descendants of Aaron, and their miraculous pregnancy is comparable to Abraham and Sarah’s; Joseph is of the house of David; Simeon and Anna are prophetic figures. However, such “marks of honor as these are conspicuous by their absence in the case of Luke’s introduction of Mary ... Her family of origin is never mentioned.”<sup>13</sup> She is instead called blessed on account of the virtues she possesses, those very ones that compose the Marian ideal of prayer, which she demonstrates in her response to the angel. She

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<sup>9</sup> Joel B. Green, “Blessed Is She Who Believed,” in *Blessed One: Protestant Perspectives on Mary*, ed. Beverly Roberts Gaventa and Cynthia L. Rigby (Louisville: Westminster John Knox Press, 2002), 13.

<sup>10</sup> Ibid.

<sup>11</sup> Bede, *Catena Aurea, Vol. III*, 31.

<sup>12</sup> Green, “Blessed,” 13-14.

<sup>13</sup> Ibid., 14.

obediently shows “herself to be one who hears and embraces God’s word, one who submits herself to the divine purpose” by “naming the head of her family as God”<sup>14</sup> as she proclaims herself *hē doulē kuriou* (ἡ δούλη κυρίου), “the handmaid of the Lord” (1:38 KJV).<sup>15</sup> Thus, her faithful obedience inspires the Christian to take after her. This is well, for her miraculous “motherhood is unique, and therefore inimitable; not so her love.”<sup>16</sup>

### *The Visitation*

When Mary comes to visit her cousin Elizabeth, she is greeted by Gabriel’s very words, this time from the mouth of her cousin: “Blessed art thou among women,” now with the appropriate addition of, “and blessed is the fruit of thy womb” (1:42, KJV). Now Mary *is* blessed on account of her motherhood, but not to the detriment of her faith, for Elizabeth goes on: “And blessed is she that believed: for there shall be a performance of those things which were told her from the Lord” (1:45, KJV). John McHugh notes that it “is surprising that Elizabeth here uses the third person (‘to her’) when in verse 42 she had used the second person,”<sup>17</sup> and goes on to quote the Lutheran exegete, Heikki Räisänen: “Räisänen comments: ‘The first saying (v. 42) applies only to Mary personally. The latter (v. 45) can be taken out of its context, and thereupon becomes . . . an expression of the fundamental attitude of the *Christian* to the word of God. Mary is here taken as the model

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<sup>14</sup> Ibid., 15.

<sup>15</sup> ἡ δούλη κυρίου may also be translated “bondslave of” or “servant of the Lord.” In any case, she is placed within the household of God.

<sup>16</sup> John McHugh, *The Mother of Jesus in the New Testament* (Garden City, NY: Doubleday & Company, Inc., 1975), 347.

<sup>17</sup> Ibid., 68.

of the Christian.”<sup>18</sup> Christ himself later calls all such hearers of the word blessed (Luke 8:21, 11:28); so too Mary, having “reacted to the word of God in faith,” is “the first believer; and over her the first Lucan beatitude is uttered.”<sup>19</sup> John McHugh expands on this, again beginning with a quote from Räisänen:<sup>20</sup>

“Mary is a typical *Hearer of the Word*. With her, the ‘seed’ does not fall on rock or among thorns. Mary listens to the word, keeps it and ponders it in her heart (2:19, 51). In this, all hearers should imitate her. . . . Mary is the exemplar and type of the believer. Both her experiences and her behavior are exemplary for Christians.” In this summary by a Lutheran exegete, everything that is said in praise of Mary may (and should) be accepted by all Christians, whatever their confessional creed.<sup>21</sup>

Thus, Elizabeth blesses her cousin twice over with words used by Gabriel, the same beatitude that will be uttered by Mary’s child. She is first blessed for bearing this child, for being “the chosen vessel of the Incarnation,” the “pivot point of God’s saving plan.”<sup>22</sup> She is then blessed for her faith, a blessing available to all who believe, as illuminated by Elizabeth’s language.

Mary’s response to these abundant blessings reveals her to be, “like Miriam and Hannah before her, a divinely inspired poet.”<sup>23</sup> It is sometimes a challenge not to imagine her *Magnificat* as sung:

And Mary said, My soul doth magnify the Lord,  
And my spirit hath rejoiced in God my Savior.

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<sup>18</sup> Ibid.

<sup>19</sup> Joseph A. Fitzmyer, SJ, “Mary in Lucan Salvation History,” in *Luke the Theologian* (New York/Mahwah: Paulist Press, 1989), 69.

<sup>20</sup> Here he is quoting p. 154 of Räisänen’s *Die Mutter Jesu im Neuen Testament* at the beginning of this passage.

<sup>21</sup> McHugh, “Mother of Jesus,” 151-152.

<sup>22</sup> Jeffrey, “Hail Mary.”

<sup>23</sup> Ibid.

For he hath regarded the low estate of his handmaiden: for, behold, from henceforth all generations shall call me blessed.  
For he that is mighty hath done to me great things; and holy is his name. And his mercy is on them that fear him from generation to generation. He hath shewed strength with his arm; he hath scattered the proud in the imagination of their hearts.  
He hat put down the mighty from their seats, and exalted them of low degree. He hath filled the hungry with good things; and the rich he hath sent empty away. He hath helped his servant Israel, in remembrance of his mercy; As he spake to our fathers, to Abraham, and to his seed for ever. (Luke 1:46-55, KJV)

Martin Luther responds to Mary's poem with awe: "Now, in all of Scripture I do not know anything that serves such a purpose so well as this sacred hymn of the most blessed Mother of God ... this pure virgin well deserves to be heard by a prince and lord, as she sings him her sacred, chaste, and salutary song."<sup>24</sup> Luther writes that Mary "sang [this hymn] not for herself alone but for us all, to sing it after her,"<sup>25</sup> singing in imitation of such "a wondrous soul" that "finds herself the Mother of God, exalted above all mortals, and still remains so simple and so calm that she does not think of any poor serving maid as beneath her."<sup>26</sup> That she places herself in a "low estate" and devotes half of the song to God's work in scattering the proud and exalting the lowly is proof that her observation, that "from henceforth all generations shall call" her blessed, is not prideful; it is prophetic. John McHugh suggests that the very fact that Luke could "have written that phrase" at the time of his writing is proof that "his own generation had ... begun to call

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<sup>24</sup> Martin Luther, "The Magnificat," trans. A.T.W. Steinhäuser, in *Luther's Works*, ed. Jaroslav Pelikan (Saint Louis: Concordia Publishing House, 1956), 298.

<sup>25</sup> *Ibid.*, 306. He also, in writing about the Magnificat to Prince John Frederick, Duke of Saxony, wishes that the prince "may draw from it wholesome knowledge and a praiseworthy life, and thus come to chant and sing this Magnificat eternally in heaven" (298).

<sup>26</sup> *Ibid.*, 308.

her blessed.”<sup>27</sup> But Mary’s blessed ideal is not a lofty and unreachable one, she is an “accessible exemplar”<sup>28</sup> – one in whom “the majesty and unapproachable holiness of God joined the frail impermanence of fallen humanity.”<sup>29</sup> As she, in all her frailty, is blessed, so too may those who sing their lives in harmony with her *Magnificat* may find themselves blessed.

### *Pentecost*

The last biblical scene I would like to turn to that gives evidence of Mary as a paragon of prayer occurs in the first chapter of Acts. After Jesus’ Ascension, the disciples “together with the women and Mary the mother of Jesus, and his brothers” went “to the upper room, where they were staying” in Jerusalem (1:12-14, ESV). There, “with one mind,” they “were continually devoting themselves to prayer” (1:14, NASB). Here is a scene of the growing tree of Christianity: Mary, bearer of its seed, in the company of the “branches” of its “vine” (John 15:5). She is implicitly present at Pentecost as well (“When the day of Pentecost arrived, they were all together in one place,” Acts 2:1, ESV); in fact, much of the art and iconography of Pentecost depicts Mary at the center of the disciples. Joseph Fitzmyer writes, “Luke has depicted Mary from the beginning as a believer (1:45), as the model disciple who not only listens to the Word of God but acts on it (8:21, 11:28), so now he portrays her in the ‘upper room’ ... in a characteristically Lucan attitude of discipleship, viz., at prayer.”<sup>30</sup> After this explicit mentioning and her

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<sup>27</sup> McHugh, “Mother of Jesus,” 71.

<sup>28</sup> Green, “Blessed,” 10.

<sup>29</sup> Jeffrey, “Hail Mary.”

<sup>30</sup> Fitzmyer, “Mary,” 78.



implicit presence at Pentecost, “Mary disappears from the Lucan story, but the evangelist has left us with his own lasting impression of her: a believer at prayer.”<sup>31</sup> This last image of Mary resounds through history: a faithful, blessed servant of the Lord, praying.

### *Virtues in Prayer*

Mary has been called “the exemplary disciple, a Christian prototype,”<sup>32</sup> “a model for all Christians,”<sup>33</sup> a “wondrous pure spirit . . . worthy of even greater praise,”<sup>34</sup> the “first example of the Christian who keeps God’s word,”<sup>35</sup> and even the symbol of “the perfect Christian.”<sup>36</sup> However, the question stands: how do believers model their life after the “most blessed Mother of God”?<sup>37</sup>

The Catholic theologian Hans Urs von Balthasar suggests that we should look to Mary because she is “nothing other than what God’s almighty grace is capable of and at the same time what we should strive after in order to become proper vessels for this grace.”<sup>38</sup> To become a proper vessel for grace, the believer must learn to pray as Mary, to hear as Mary, to see as Mary: “it is from her point of view, from her memory that we should look at the mysteries of Jesus’ life . . . we must put on Mary’s spectacles in order

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<sup>31</sup> Ibid.

<sup>32</sup> Turid Karlsen Seim, *The Double Message: Patterns of Gender in Luke-Acts* (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1994), 115.

<sup>33</sup> McHugh, “Mother of Jesus,” 347.

<sup>34</sup> Luther, “Magnificat,” 311.

<sup>35</sup> Anthony J. Tambasco, *What Are They Saying about Mary?* (New York/Ramsey: Paulist Press, 1984), 28.

<sup>36</sup> Ibid., 26.

<sup>37</sup> Luther, “Magnificat,” 298.

<sup>38</sup> Hans Urs von Balthasar, *Mary for Today*, trans. Robert Nowell (San Francisco: Ignatius Press, 1988), 44.

to see exactly.”<sup>39</sup> In devotion the believer must “have the spirit of Mary, so that he may rejoice in the Lord,”<sup>40</sup> so that what “Christ is for her, what God is for her, becomes the primal and primary image of what he should be for us.”<sup>41</sup> This occurs “when in simplicity we try to look through her at the mysteries of our redemption.”<sup>42</sup>

Again, Mary is a blessed model not merely for her motherhood, but also for the qualities of her faith. Some may feel unease at treating Mary as a model; they may fear that this overly exalts her for her role in God’s salvific plan, crafting an idol. These wish to isolate the virtues she displays from her person; they attempt to pursue the abstract and abandon the personal. This, however, is impossible. Mary’s identity, motherhood, and meditative virtues are inseparable. As Adrienne von Speyr writes,

Her personal qualities flow together like a sea. They do not exist separately, side by side, rather they form one simple whole. If one tried to pick out the most essential of her qualities, no one quality could ever be emphasized definitively, for each is connected with all the others, and each can be regarded as the center of her being. One can never describe one quality without at least suggesting the others.<sup>43</sup>

The reader of Luke, stirred by Jesus’ many prayerful retreats, seeks to learn how to pray. Christ verbally offers two parables and brief instruction. This only increases the reader’s appetite. The reader longs to be a disciple of godly prayer, to follow in the footsteps of a great contemplative as a disciple follows his rabbi. The reader seeks not ideas, but a person. Christ, the Word, gives in the same Scriptures his Mother to the

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<sup>39</sup> Ibid.

<sup>40</sup> Ambrose, *Catena Aurea*, Vol. III, 43.

<sup>41</sup> von Balthasar, *Mary for Today*, 44.

<sup>42</sup> Ibid., 45.

<sup>43</sup> Adrienne von Speyr, *Handmaid of the Lord*, trans. E.A. Nelson (San Francisco: Ignatius Press, 1985), 19.

seeking believer as this person. As Adrienne von Speyr writes: “Her entire strength flows to her continuously from prayer. She prays to the Father, but her conversation with the Son is also living prayer ... She speaks in a very human way with the Son, to be sure; he is a living Thou for her. But because the Son is engaged in an uninterruptible dialogue with the Father, Mary’s conversation is completely drawn into the divine parley.”<sup>44</sup>

In the following chapters, I will attempt to better reveal this person; to better discover her prayerful virtues given in Scripture. While each of the four virtues I isolate will be treated separately, von Speyr’s warning will be kept in mind: each is connected with all the others, for “One can never describe on equality without at least suggesting the others.”<sup>45</sup> Therefore, the discussion of one virtue will illuminate the examination of another, and each may point to other imitable qualities not dealt with at all. But perhaps in approaching this mother and her child with the heart of the wise men, we may too utter the prayer, “Behold the servant of the Lord.”

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<sup>44</sup> Ibid., 23.

<sup>45</sup> Ibid., 19.

## CHAPTER TWO

### A Pierced Heart of Treasures

#### *“Pondering them in her heart”: Quiet Meditation upon Mystery*

The first of Mary’s meditative virtues is her quiet meditation upon the holy mysteries that she is confronted with. This virtue is perhaps itself the foundation of contemplation. It is most clearly manifested three times in the gospel of Luke. The first occurs in Luke 1:28-29 when, after hearing Gabriel’s greeting of her as “blessed,” she casts “in her mind,” or ponders, “what manner of salutation this should be” (KJV). The second comes in Luke 2:19 where again, after being visited by the angel-sent shepherds, Mary “treasured up all these things, pondering them in her heart” (ESV). The final instance happens when, twelve years later, Mary and Joseph find Jesus at the temple astounding the teachers. After Jesus tells them that he “must be in [his] Father’s house,” he returns with them in submission (Luke 2:49-51, ESV). Mary again treasures “up all these things in her heart.” Despite the common refrains of “pondering” and “treasuring,” each of these instances of quiet meditation offers a unique example necessary for the contemplative to consider as he seeks to ruminate well upon the Word of God.

#### *The Annunciation*

In the first occurrence, Gabriel comes to Mary alone “in an inner chamber, unseen by the eyes of men, discovered only by an angel.”<sup>1</sup> Not only does Mary display the propriety of an engaged virgin, but also the prudence of a contemplative. She is in the same setting that Christ

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<sup>1</sup> Ambrose and St. Thomas Aquinas, *Catena Aurea, Vol. III: St. Luke*, trans. and ed. John Henry Cardinal Newman (London: The Saint Austin Press, 1999), 26.

would later instruct his disciples to seek for prayer: “when you pray, go into your inner room, close your door and pray to your Father who is in secret, and your Father who sees what is done in secret will reward you” (Matt. 6:6, NASB). Already Mary exemplifies the contemplative in her action.

When Gabriel then greets her as the “favored one,” she is “very perplexed” and “kept pondering what kind of salutation this was” (Luke 1:28-29, NASB). The phrase “kept pondering” is the Greek *dialogizeto* (διελογίζετο) – which is the imperfect form of the verb *dialogizesthai* (διαλογίζεσθαι), meaning “to ponder” (especially in the sense of weighing or comparing. It may also mean, “to balance accounts” or “discuss,” “converse,” or “dialogue”). The fact that the verb is in the imperfect tense is crucial: the action of her contemplation is an ongoing, uncompleted action. It is not a one-time head scratching at the angelic greeting, but a continuing rumination.<sup>2</sup> Not only does Mary treat these “joyful words” with careful and ongoing consideration and thought, but she “neither openly resisted through unbelief, nor forthwith lightly complied.”<sup>3</sup> Thus, she avoids “equally the inconstancy of Eve, and the insensibility of Zacharias,” who questions Gabriel out of unbelief.<sup>4</sup> She balances the whole sum of the angel’s message before submitting in her *fiat*. Her decision comes not as the hesitant deliberation of pondering to make a choice, but her great declaration of faith is the fruit and product of her quiet contemplation.

Such prudent pondering is the proper response when confronted with the incomprehensible mysteries of God. Just as the Holy Spirit overshadows her, these mysteries

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<sup>2</sup> Unfortunately, many translations render this verb in the completed past tense. The KJV renders it “cast her mind,” the ESV has “tried to discern,” the NIV “wondered,” and the NRSV has “pondered.”

<sup>3</sup> Greek Ex., *Catena Aurea Vol. III*, 27-28.

<sup>4</sup> Ibid.

“tower over her”: “in no way at all does she understand everything completely from the first moment onward but has to work away tirelessly in order to understand all these overpowering ideas as well as she may.”<sup>5</sup> However, “instead of resigning herself to bafflement” she gives God’s mysteries “space in her heart in order” to continually “mull over them there.”<sup>6</sup> She continues to house within her, alongside and embodied by the Christ-child, the contemplative dialogue between heavenly mystery and incarnate reality. In her mulling, she is not lost in the consideration of mystery, but continually reminded of its truth and presence by her pregnancy.<sup>7</sup> She does not fall into detached abstraction or hyper-intellectualism, for the very mystery she ponders is concretely present. Therefore, her pondering does not become “any stumbling in the dark but a quiet, silent growth in insight, and indeed in the insight of the simple ‘handmaid of the Lord.’”<sup>8</sup>

The contemplative seeks this sort of listening and ruminating. Mariano Magrassi writes on the prayerful process of hearing the word of God, digestively meditating upon it, and responding with it: “All we need to do is read, listen and ruminate. Then, having filled those words with all our thought, our love and our life, we repeat to God what he has said to us. ... Mary, the model ... of the Church also prayed this way. Her Magnificat is a patchwork of biblical texts. Verses from the Psalms and the Canticle of Hannah spontaneously rise to her lips.”<sup>9</sup> While meditation engages the intellect, it is not merely cerebral; it “centers on

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<sup>5</sup> Hans Urs von Balthasar, *Mary for Today*, trans. Robert Nowell (San Francisco: Ignatius Press, 1988), 36.

<sup>6</sup> Ibid.

<sup>7</sup> Ibid.

<sup>8</sup> Ibid., 37.

<sup>9</sup> Mariano Magrassi, *Praying the Bible* (Collegeville, MN: Liturgical Press 1990), 113-114.

internalizing” Scripture, coming “to God with both mind and heart.”<sup>10</sup> This transcends the emotions as well – though encountering a passage emotionally is included in meditation – for contemplation deals “with something far deeper than mere emotions ... a deep experienced sense of God.”<sup>11</sup> When towered over by the mysteries of God, the believer first meditates on the humanity of Christ,<sup>12</sup> encountering the “great abstract nouns” which refer to God in the particular life of Christ.<sup>13</sup> This is why Mary, and thus the contemplative as well, ponders these things in her heart. This is contemplation grounded in affection, not intellection; it occurs in a “breast warm with love,” infusing holy devotion.<sup>14</sup>

### *The Shepherds*

Mary’s second pondering comes after another visitation, this time of shepherds who had received their own annunciation of the birth of their Savior. In this instance, she “kept” or “treasured” the things she beholds as well as again pondering them (Luke 2:19, KJV and NASB respectively). However, this instance of pondering is described by the Greek *symbollein* (συμβάλλειν), which literally translates into “to throw together.” She considers these events “from all possible angles,”<sup>15</sup> collecting and comparing them in her mind and finding the second

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<sup>10</sup> Richard Foster, *Prayer: Finding the Heart's True Home* (San Francisco: HarperSanFrancisco, 1992), 146, 147.

<sup>11</sup> *Ibid.*, 158.

<sup>12</sup> *Meditations on the Life of Christ*, trans. Isa Ragusa and Rosalie B. Green (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1961), 263.

<sup>13</sup> von Balthasar, *Prayer*, 164.

<sup>14</sup> *Meditations*, 263.

<sup>15</sup> von Balthasar, *Mary for Today*, 36.

harmonious with the first.<sup>16</sup> The product of their consonance is a deepened faith: gathering “up in her heart the materials of faith”<sup>17</sup> so that they “form one body,” “proving the glory of Christ.”<sup>18</sup>

This gathering, or treasuring as it is frequently translated, is an act unique from Mary’s meditation upon Gabriel’s greeting. In the first, she is confronted with the incomprehensible: Gabriel, “who stands in the presence of God,” declares that the Holy God of Israel is with her (Luke 1:19, NASB). The word resonates within her heart, and she responds. Now she has received two greetings, they may be thrown together, gathered together, offering a harmonious resonance. This means that when she treasures these words, she is not merely storing the memory of the shepherds visit, but instead is creating a meditative space within her heart – an “interior dimension of understanding where sense and spirit, reason and feeling, interior and exterior perception interpenetrate circumincessively.”<sup>19</sup> Mariano Magrassi describes such a space in *Praying the Bible*:

... we must create within our hearts a flexible space of resonance, so that the Word can penetrate its deepest parts and touch its innermost fibers. This demands the kind of recollection we feel the need for when something great and beautiful appears in our life ... We feel the need to keep listening to this inner echo until it has permeated every fiber of our heart.<sup>20</sup>

In treasuring these moments, she not only throws them together, ruminating upon them and harmonizing them, but she sounds them within the totality of her being. She embodies God’s

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<sup>16</sup> Metaphrastes, *Catena Aurea Vol. III*, 75.

<sup>17</sup> Ambrose, *Catena Aurea Vol. III*, 75.

<sup>18</sup> John Calvin, *Commentary on a Harmony of the Evangelists, Matthew, Mark, and Luke: Vol. I*, trans. Rev. William Pringle (Grand Rapids: WM. B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 1949), 125.

<sup>19</sup> Hans Urs von Balthasar and Joseph Cardinal Ratzinger, *Mary: The Church at the Source*, trans. Adrian Walker (San Francisco: Ignatius Press, 2005), 71.

<sup>20</sup> Magrassi, 109.



words in Ezekiel 3:10: "...all my words that I shall speak unto thee receive in thine heart, and hear with thine ears" (KJV).

### *The Puzzlement at the Temple*

The third instance of Mary's quiet meditation in Luke has no mention of pondering, but instead only says that Mary again "treasured up all these things in her heart" (Luke 2:51, ESV).<sup>21</sup> On this occasion the mystery that confronts her is the authority of her son. Having "astonished" and "amazed" both the teachers at the temple and his own parents once they find him, Jesus confounds the worried Mary and Joseph when he asks them, "Why were you looking for me? Did you not know that I must be in my Father's house?" (Luke 2:46-50, ESV). Mary, though not understanding her son, still "equally laid up all things in her heart for reflection and diligent examination."<sup>22</sup> Bede writes:

Mary, the mother of true wisdom, becomes the scholar or disciple of the Child. For she yielded to Him not as to a boy, nor as to a man, but as unto God. Further, she pondered upon both His divine words and works, so that nothing that was said or done by Him was lost upon her, but as the Word itself was before in her womb, so now she conceived the ways and words of the same, and in a manner nursed them in her heart.<sup>23</sup>

This exemplifies humble meditation. Instead of only accepting what she understands, she quietly allows into her resonant heart the words her son speaks and the wisdom-beyond-years with which he teaches. Here she meditates with even greater faith than before: she is not able to tie her non-comprehension to a concretization, nor does she harmonize this occurrence with other sayings. The Greek word, usually translated "treasured" or "kept," is *diatērein* (διατηρεῖν), which literally means to "watch closely" or "observe." It is the same word used in the Septuagint when

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<sup>21</sup> The NASB offers a similar translation, the KJV uses "kept" instead of "treasured."

<sup>22</sup> Bede, *Catena Aurea Vol. III*, 103.

<sup>23</sup> *Ibid.*

an unsettled Jacob hears Joseph's dream of the sun, moon, and eleven stars: the father "observed the saying" without understanding (Gen. 37:11, KJV). Mary does not attempt to assimilate the truth spoken by her son into her own understanding; she knows that comprehension in this is beyond her (a humility that Confucius and Socrates both hail as wisdom<sup>24</sup>). Yet she "keeps all this in her heart, and there she nourishes it and lets it become a growing noncomprehension."<sup>25</sup> She guards this too in her heart and allows it to grow, not as her own mystery, "but as the strange, incomprehensible mystery in her which Father and Son share and which she must simply store up until it is brought forth again from her intact, at the hour when it is needed."<sup>26</sup>

John Calvin suggests that the Christian should seek to emulate this humble meditation: "Let us learn from this, to receive with reverence, and *to lay up* in our minds, (Like the seed, which is allowed to remain for some time under ground,) those mysteries of God which exceed our capacity."<sup>27</sup> The contemplative seeking the Marian ideal of prayer will also allow God's word to enter his heart in quiet patience, praying with the hope that Mystery will one day be revealed. The seemingly "least of all seeds" that is planted in the believer's heart will "becometh a tree" (Matt. 13:32, KJV). The observant hope tied to keeping watch and observing the mysterious has both imminent and eschatological dimension. The praying Christian is charged to be ever watchful for Christ's return; Jesus himself, foretelling his return, tells his disciples, "Watch ye therefore, and pray always..." (Luke 21:36a, KJV). In imminent terms, the contemplative observes and stores up in his heart mysteries unknown to him, he must "be content

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<sup>24</sup> See Confucius's *Analects* II.17 and Plato's *Apology* 21d and 23b.

<sup>25</sup> Adrienne von Speyr, *Handmaid of the Lord*, trans. E.A. Nelson (San Francisco: Ignatius Press, 1985), 96.

<sup>26</sup> *Ibid.*, 97.

<sup>27</sup> Calvin, *Commentary Vol. I*, 171.

to remain with the Son in a state of not-knowing,” as Mary was.<sup>28</sup> As the infinite mysteries of God he has stored up are slowly revealed to him, he is stretched heat, soul, mind, and strength as he further discovers the infinitude of God’s love. However, the time of any forthcoming revelation, as well as of Christ’s return, are unknown to the believer. Therefore, he must be disciplined, patient, and diligent in his watching.

The discipline of Mary is that after she anxiously seeks, finds, and is confronted with mystery, she merely observes. Having sought Jesus with fervent grief, she does not continue to search for the meaning of his words. She makes allowance for peace in the face of unfathomed depths. The believer, who has sought to further encounter God’s love in the Scriptures and in meditating upon Christ, must allow himself “not to be restlessly searching . . . as if contemplation were a matter of achieving a specified quantity, or of reaching some kind of end result.”<sup>29</sup> The contemplative must learn to be satisfied with “lovingly dwelling upon the depth-dimension” of aspects of God’s incomparable fullness.<sup>30</sup> He yearns for more, but without restlessness; longing and peace dwell within him harmoniously. He must trust that Grace will guide him when it is time “to throw stones,” bombarding the words he has received together seeking harmony; when it is time “to gather stones,” searching through the Scriptures for truth; and when it is time to simply observe the stones he has gathered (Eccles. 3:5, NASB). He seeks a rhythm like the ones known by hikers or art-viewers: a time comes when it is appropriate and necessary to stop, be at peace, and behold a painting or vantage point with awe that cannot fully contain what it sees.

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<sup>28</sup> Hans Urs von Balthasar, *Prayer*, trans. Graham Harrison (San Francisco: Ignatius Press, 1986), 148.

<sup>29</sup> *Ibid.*, 130.

<sup>30</sup> *Ibid.*

Yet, each finds the cresting moment when it is time to trek onwards on the trail or move to the next painting.

*“A sword shall pierce through thy own soul also” : Suffering, Kenosis, and Bearing the Cross*

Mary’s second meditative virtue is displayed in her self-renunciation, perseverance in suffering, and patient sorrow. It is the virtue tied to *passio*, to suffering, subjection, and affection. It encompasses the poles of ecstasy – one stands outside of oneself (the literal Greek meaning of *ekstasis*), rent by sorrow and renewed in identity. It is exemplified in Simeon’s words to Mary in Luke 2:34-35: “And Simeon blessed them, and said unto Mary his mother, Behold, this child is set for the fall and rising again of many in Israel; and for a sign which shall be spoken against; (Yea, a sword shall pierce through thy own soul also,) that the thoughts of many hearts may be revealed” (KJV). I will look at three occurrences of Mary’s suffering and self-renunciation (for, we shall see, the two are connected) – her pregnancy and childbirth, when she seeks the young Jesus at the temple, and finally as she beholds her son’s death upon the Cross.

*Renunciation upon Annunciation*

Before she undergoes the sufferings of childbirth, Mary’s denial of self begins at the Annunciation. In her assenting *fiat*, “she renounces herself, makes herself nothing, in order to let God alone become active in her ... For cooperation with the action of grace is always the fruit of a renunciation.”<sup>31</sup> She declares herself a handmaid (*doulē*), the same word Paul uses when he writes of Christ taking on the form of a servant (*doulos*) and emptying himself in obedience even unto death (Phil. 2:6-7). Mary empties herself in obedience and humility as well – she makes both a meditative and physical space in her person for God, retaining “nothing for herself,” but

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<sup>31</sup> von Speyr, *Handmaid*, 9.

offering her totality to God.<sup>32</sup> John artistically conveys how her identity is remade in Christ: in his gospel she “no longer has any name except ‘the Mother of Jesus’. It is as if she had handed over her personal dimension, in order now to be solely at his disposal, and precisely thereby had become a person.”<sup>33</sup> She surrenders herself to the point, as we shall see, of participating Christ’s death, for the “expectation of the birth is like an anticipation of the Cross ... In placing herself so much at his disposal for the expectation of the Son, the Mother learns directly to put herself at this disposal for his coming Cross.”<sup>34</sup> Her identity, body, and will are offered to God as she personifies the self-diminishing words that her cousin’s son would one day speak: “He must increase, but I must decrease” (John 3:30, KJV).

This emptying, or *kenosis*, is the charge of the contemplative as well. His goal is to abandon himself, to stand beyond himself. Such self-denial, however, is not simply a turn away from the “I,” but a turn *to* God. The contemplative relinquishes the things of his heart that take up the space claimed by God’s word – the sword and fire that the contemplative longs to conquer the territory within him.<sup>35</sup> Richard Foster reflects that “little by little we are changed by this daily crucifixion of the will ... [and] New graces emerge.”<sup>36</sup> The Christian continually receives God’s word anew, with a delight imitated in the lover beholding his beloved. The marvel of this is that the contemplative’s self-abandonment results in self-rediscovery in God – union “with God does not mean the loss of” individuality, but rather fuller personhood.<sup>37</sup> As Hans Urs von Balthasar

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<sup>32</sup> Ibid., 45.

<sup>33</sup> von Balthasar and Ratzinger, *Church at the Source*, 15-16.

<sup>34</sup> Ibid., 69.

<sup>35</sup> von Balthasar, *Prayer*, 25.

<sup>36</sup> Richard Foster, *Prayer*, 54.

<sup>37</sup> Ibid., 159.

writes in *Prayer*, “This looking to God is contemplation. It is looking inward into the depths of the soul, and hence beyond the soul toward God. The more contemplation finds God, the more it forgets itself and yet discovers itself in him.”<sup>38</sup> This occurs both in the intellectual meditation on God’s Word as well as the affectual; He claims both the mind and the heart. The contemplative empties the totality of himself, and it is returned to him remade. Yet, none “has ever so completely renounced everything of his own in order to let God rule as did Mary.”<sup>39</sup> Mary, fully seeking to serve God, both abandons herself and then finds herself more fully; the soul of the humble “handmaid” of the Lord is the soul that then magnifies Him in its “low estate” (Luke 1:38, 46-48, KJV).

### *The Self-Giving of Pregnancy*

Mary’s first suffering begins with her pregnancy. Some, such as Gregory of Nyssa, claim that because “virginity becoming capable of childbirth betokens something above man” and that Christ is not “subject to the laws of man’s nature” in all things, Mary’s “burden was light, the birth immaculate, the delivery without pain.”<sup>40</sup> Hans Urs von Balthasar, however, flatly denies this assertion:

Mary’s nine-month Advent was not without pain. Even if she was preserved from original sin ... this does not mean that she was therefore spared the pains that from the very beginning have been laid on woman in childbirth: ‘I will greatly multiply your pain in childbearing; in pain you shall bring forth children’ (Gen 3:16). What Mary has to suffer is expiation for Eve and her descendants.<sup>41</sup>

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<sup>38</sup> Ibid., 24.

<sup>39</sup> von Speyr, *Handmaid*, 9.

<sup>40</sup> Gregory of Nyssa, *Catena Aurea Vol. III*, 66.

<sup>41</sup> von Balthasar, *Mary for Today*, 23.

Not only are Mary's pregnancy pains a sign of the redemption to come,<sup>42</sup> endured for the sake of mankind and all Creation, but they are also pains undergone for her child, the Christ. Her sufferings – mental, spiritual, and physical – like every pregnancy are “a certain intercession, a certain suffering on behalf of the child ... It is a selfless hope, a commending to God.”<sup>43</sup> Initially, she shows the same endurance “which lies in every pregnancy,” but such obedient endurance prepares her for the Way of the Cross – the way that all Christians must go by.<sup>44</sup> The terminology of “endurance” can be misleading, though. Mary does not “merely put up with the suffering, she accepts it with her whole soul.”<sup>45</sup> When faced with conception, and the pains of childbirth that follow, her response is “Let it be.” She weds her passive obedience and endurance with active participation; her “increased passive surrender is also an increased active reception.”<sup>46</sup> The assent of will was her first gift, and now she offers more and more of herself to her son, “an ever greater readiness, an ever fuller correspondence.”<sup>47</sup>

This too is a model for the contemplative. Von Balthasar writes in *Prayer*: “As long as we stand under the law of sin this fulfillment will always have a painful side to it. We must relinquish things that are ours because they take up space which God's word claims in us.”<sup>48</sup> Mary's space is painfully made within her own womb: her will not only relinquishes itself to God's, she assents for God's Word to take physical space within her, just as the contemplative

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<sup>42</sup> See also Rom. 8:22; Matt. 24:8-14; and Mark 13:8-13.

<sup>43</sup> von Balthasar, *Mary for Today*, 24.

<sup>44</sup> von Speyr, *Handmaid*, 70.

<sup>45</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>46</sup> *Ibid.*, 71.

<sup>47</sup> *Ibid.*, 70.

<sup>48</sup> von Balthasar, *Prayer*, 25.

should endeavor to do so spiritually. Mary is fertile soil for the living God, the contemplative too seeks to be good soil. But to be “soil for the Word means that the soil must allow itself to be absorbed by the seed, to be assimilated by the seed, to surrender itself for the sake of transforming the seed into life.”<sup>49</sup> For the contemplative, this begins in the process of repentance. An intimate, “personal encounter with the word” forces the contemplative from a temporary sense of autonomous security – he “must look the word in the eye, he must feel God’s gaze upon his life, and he is obliged to condemn himself and acknowledge that God is in the right.”<sup>50</sup> Just as Mary becomes continually aware of Jesus as he grows within her, so too the contemplative grows ever aware of Christ with eyes “like a flame of fire,” a voice “like the sound of many waters,” and “a sharp two-edged sword” coming from his mouth (Rev. 1:14-16). As he encounters the purity of God’s Word, his own impurity will be further revealed to him and “he will burn with the desire to be rid of it.”<sup>51</sup> This means, as we shall see in the following chapter, that contemplation entails action.

### *The Sorrow at the Temple*

Mary’s next suffering comes with the previously mentioned episode of a young Jesus left behind at the temple. Joseph and Mary seek the lost child “sorrowing” as they search for “three days,” the same time that Mary will mourn Jesus upon his Crucifixion (Luke 2:46-48, KJV). The shadow of Christ’s coming Passion continues to loom over Mary, as she suffers the potential loss of her child before finding him on the third day (any parent, I am sure, can imagine the pain and terror of a child lost for this time). However, such persistence in single-handedly and

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<sup>49</sup> von Balthasar and Ratzinger, *Church at the Source*, 15.

<sup>50</sup> von Balthasar, *Prayer*, 223.

<sup>51</sup> *Ibid.*, 225.



continuously searching for a lost child for three days is a powerful display of hope: they continue to look for Jesus, never giving him up for lost nor collapsing in petrified despair. Her sorrow and hope are not rooted in her intellect, but in her heart, for she is “moved by a mother’s feelings” and makes “her mournful enquiry ... with confidence, humility, and affection.”<sup>52</sup> Thus John Calvin calls her words to her son not a rebuke, but an “expression of grief.”<sup>53</sup> The pain of this temporary loss lays hold of her soul and, though perhaps not piercing it, strains and burdens it.

Origen compares this dolor quest to the seeking of meaning in Scripture: “But why sought they Him sorrowing? ... But as whenever you read the Scriptures you search out their meaning with pains, not that you suppose them to have erred or to contain any thing incorrect, but that the truth which they have inherent in them you are anxious to find out; so they sought Jesus.”<sup>54</sup> Here again is the charge to an active correspondence with grace. The person who prays must be receptive to God’s Word, but he also must actively seek it. This corresponds to one of Jesus’ rare explicit instructions on prayer: “seek, and you will find; knock, and it will be opened to you. For everyone who asks, receives; and he who seeks, finds; and to him who knocks, it will be opened” (Luke 11:9-10, NASB).<sup>55</sup> Yet, in the assurance of the seeker finding, there is no promise of ease; these instructions follow a parable about praying with persistence (11:5-8). The contemplative then must search “not carelessly and idly ... but with labour and sorrow.”<sup>56</sup> Insofar as the journey through and into Scripture is an intellectual activity, it cannot be void of passion. The heart of the saint and martyr, the heart of the Mother, and the heart of Christ abound

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<sup>52</sup> Greek Ex., *Catena Aurea Vol. III*, 99.

<sup>53</sup> Calvin, *Commentary Vol. I*, 170.

<sup>54</sup> Origen, *Catena Aurea Vol. III*, 100.

<sup>55</sup> See also Matt. 7:7-8.

<sup>56</sup> Origen, *Catena Aurea Vol. III*, 100.

with love that is willing to find themselves lost, willing to sorrow, and willing to die. The contemplative must strive for the same heart as he seeks Jesus as Mary did.

### *The Cross*

The final suffering of Mary we shall examine occurs as she beholds the death of her son. Both John's and Luke's Gospel have moments in which Jesus' death is foretold to Mary. In the Gospel of John, Christ himself tells her, "My hour has not yet come" (John 2:4, NASB). This is the first reference in John to Jesus' "hour," a term that is repeatedly used in reference to his death (John 12:27; 13:1; 16:32; 17:1).<sup>57</sup> Furthermore, Mary only appears in John's narrative at the wedding and the cross, tying the two points together.<sup>58</sup> In Luke, the prophecy of Simeon, "a sword shall pierce through thy own soul also," is frequently interpreted as predicting Mary's sorrow upon Christ's death. Bede takes up this interpretation, writing that grief over Christ's Passion, like a sword, "passed through her soul, who although she saw Christ the very Son of God die a voluntary death, and doubted not that He who was begotten of her flesh would overcome death, could not without grief see Him crucified."<sup>59</sup>

While Luke does not explicitly mention Mary at the Cross, John does: "When Jesus then saw His mother, and the disciple whom He loved standing nearby, He said to His mother, 'Woman, behold, your son!' Then He said to the disciple, 'Behold, your mother!' From that hour the disciple took her into his own household" (John 19:26-27, NASB). Mary's presence at the cross is a sort of second *fiat*: as she once said "Yes" to the incomprehensible pregnancy, taking

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<sup>57</sup> Beverly Roberts Gaventa, "Standing Near the Cross: Mary and the Crucifixion of Jesus," in *Blessed One: Protestant Perspectives on Mary*, ed. Beverly Roberts Gaventa and Cynthia L. Rigby (Louisville: Westminster John Knox Press, 2002), 49.

<sup>58</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>59</sup> Bede, *Catena Aurea Vol. III*, 90.

Jesus' life within her, now she beholds his death and allows that great pain to enter her as well.<sup>60</sup> Just as the inner temple's veil is rent (Matt. 27:51, KJV), so too the "inmost sanctuary is pierced, and what is finally hidden there streams out; blood and water. This happens to the dead body of Jesus, while the 'sword [that] will pierce through your own soul' drives into the living body of his mother and lays bare her beating heart."<sup>61</sup>

Mary participates in the suffering of Christ, though she is unpierced by nails or spear, her very soul is punctured by the sight she beholds. While her *fiat* assented to the future suffering childbirth, she continues to behold her son, accepting in every moment the suffering of a pierced soul. She suffers both as a human mother, but she also "suffers in the Son"; she suffers "the suffering imposed on the Son. In her it becomes evident that there really exists the Christian possibility of participation in the divine, redemptive suffering."<sup>62</sup> Again, a light of hope tints her suffering, most easily seen retrospectively. She is pained because her love for her son, Christ is pained because of the Father's love for his people; the suffering of each originates in and expresses love. Wendell Berry expresses this idea beautifully in the first stanza of his poem, "The Way of Pain":

For parents, the only way  
is hard. We who give life  
give pain. There is no help.  
Yet we who give pain  
give love; by pain we learn  
the extremity of love.<sup>63</sup>

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<sup>60</sup> von Balthasar, *Mary for Today*, 38.

<sup>61</sup> *Ibid.*, 71.

<sup>62</sup> von Speyr, *Handmaid*, 80.

<sup>63</sup> Wendell Berry, "The Way of Pain," in *The Selected Poems of Wendell Berry* (Berkeley: Counterpoint Press, 1998), 113.

The contemplative too seeks to learn the extremity of love in the pain of beholding the Cross. It is in Christ's suffering upon the Cross that a divine mystery is revealed and made intelligible: the Creator's love is so deep that he might give "his only begotten Son" to "be lifted up" upon the Cross (John 3:16,14, KJV).<sup>64</sup> The non-comprehension of God's love translated into the observably particular instance of the Passion leaves the "mind reeling" and the heart pierced.<sup>65</sup> Stricken deaf and dumb in his mind, the believer is now "able to pray," denying himself "every hour" and enduring "much for the sake of prayer," for the sake of communion with his God.<sup>66</sup> Like Mary, the contemplative beholds the Crucifixion with "imaginative sight," and in doing allows this great pain to enter his soul as well.<sup>67</sup> He is united with Christ "in the likeness of His death" (Rom. 6:5, NASB), crucified with him (Gal. 2:20), and thus also in the hope of resurrection. Paul encourages the believer to bear "about in the body of the dying of the Lord Jesus, that the life also of Jesus might be made manifest in our body" (2 Cor. 4:10, KJV), so that the afflictions of suffering might produce "a far more exceeding and eternal weight of glory" (2 Cor. 4:17, KJV). Therefore, there are three movements, essentially simultaneous, in the believer's contemplation upon the Cross. First, he learns through the sacrifice of Jesus how deep the Father's love. Second, his own soul is also pierced and he may pray more truly in taking up his own cross. Finally, joined in Christ's death, he is also joined in Christ's resurrection and the hope for eternal life.

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<sup>64</sup> von Balthasar, *Prayer*, 164.

<sup>65</sup> *Ibid.*, 159.

<sup>66</sup> Evagrius Ponticus, *The Praktikos and Chapters on Prayer*, trans. John Eudes Bamberger, OCSO (Trappist, KY: Cistercian Publications, 1972), 57, 58.

<sup>67</sup> Ignatius, *The Spiritual Exercises*, trans. a Benedictine of Stanbrook, ed. Rev. C. Lattey, SJ (St. Louis: B. Herder Book Co., 1928), 54.

*Conclusion: "Easter Affliction"*

From the outset of her pregnancy, Mary was “not without some presentiment of the Cross ... she had a share in it that could not be defined.”<sup>68</sup> But her affliction “is Easter affliction”; the joy announced to her by Gabriel is “the real joy that gives us the courage to venture the exodus of love into the burning holiness of God ... that stands the test of pain and is stronger than affliction.”<sup>69</sup> The contemplative too, in housing Christ spiritually within himself, has a share in the Cross. To bear Christ *is* to bear His Cross. In crucifying his own identity, the contemplative takes on the aspects of Christ in his contemplation. His soul is pierced as Mary’s, both in sorrow, as well as by “the word of God,” which is “living and strong, and sharper than the sharpest sword.”<sup>70</sup>

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<sup>68</sup> von Balthasar, *Prayer*, 25.

<sup>69</sup> von Balthasar and Ratzinger, *Church at the Source*, 79.

<sup>70</sup> Ambrose, *Catena Aurea Vol. III*, 90.

## CHAPTER THREE

### The Fruitfulness of Obedience and Love

In this chapter, I will explore two more of Mary's meditative virtues that the contemplative is called to imitate. The first of these, her blessedness in hearing and following the word of God, flows naturally out of the first two virtues of quiet meditation and openness to persevere in suffering. The second follows it closely: Mary's submission to the will of God implies that she will actually *do* His will. Thus by bearing forth Christ she is translating her intimate contemplation into incarnate action. In doing so, the magnification of the Lord in her soul results in her bearing the physical and active fruit of His love.

#### *"Be it unto me": Hearing God's Word and Keeping It in Obedient Love*

Mary's third contemplative virtue can be seen as the fruit of her quiet meditations and self-abandoning, kenotic sufferings. It is epitomized in her great submission, the *fiat*, at the end of her conversation with Gabriel: "Behold the handmaid of the Lord; be it unto me according to thy word" (Luke 1:38, KJV). Here we see Mary's right hearing of God's word, a virtue inseparable from her quiet meditation, as well as her faithfulness and humility in desiring to keep it in obedience, even to the suffering of childbirth. We find this virtue of radical obedience expressed explicitly in Luke in Mary's *fiat* as she joyfully aligns her will with the will of the Father, giving the totality of herself as an offering to Him. Christ himself also indirectly praises Mary's loving obedience on two occasions. On the first occasion, found later in Luke, he modifies a woman's praise of Mary to demonstrate the ways in which his mother is truly blessed.

On the second occasion, which is found in all three synoptic Gospels, he both demonstrates the nature of her blessedness and offers her as a model to his followers.

*Hear and Obey: The Fiat*

John Calvin, in his *Commentary on a Harmony of the Evangelists*, calls Mary's fiat "weighty expressions."<sup>1</sup> He offers two interpretations of her words: she speaks them either as a new prayer or supplication or "she proceeds in the same strain to yield and surrender herself to God."<sup>2</sup> Our encounters with Mary's devotion thus far direct us towards the latter interpretation. Her fiat is not a new faith, but the product of her pre-existing piety. She offers "to God the free gift of her obedience" and in her humble consent she proves "herself right ready to do" just this.<sup>3</sup> Thus, the words of the prophets are fulfilled, not by the cause of her will, but by its consent.<sup>4</sup> In this simple consent, a great thing occurs: Mary's "Yes" fulfills the prayer her son shall teach, "Thy kingdom come. Thy will be done, as in heaven, so in earth" (Luke 11:2, KJV).<sup>5</sup> The infinite and bountiful will of God in Heaven is made known to this young virgin in Nazareth, and in this, her will is one with His. On account of her willful submission, His kingdom comes – God becomes man and dwells among His people, "full of grace and truth" (John 1:14, KJV). His

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<sup>1</sup> John Calvin, *Commentary on a Harmony of the Evangelists, Matthew, Mark, and Luke: Vol. I*, trans. Rev. William Pringle (Grand Rapids: WM. B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 1949), 46.

<sup>2</sup> *Ibid.*, 47.

<sup>3</sup> Thomas Aquinas, *Summa Theologica, Volume II*, trans. Fathers of the English Dominican Province (New York/Boston/Cincinnati/Chicago/San Francisco: Benziger Brothers, Inc., 1947), III, Q. 30, Art. 1, ad. 3.

<sup>4</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>5</sup> See also Matthew 6:10.

coming opens “the world of time to its invasion by the whole *being* of the kingdom of heaven” in the person of Jesus; eternal Reality enters into and becomes a temporal reality<sup>6</sup>

Calvin too favors this understanding of the *fiat*: “I interpret it simply that she is convinced of the power of God, follows cheerfully where he calls, trusts also to his promise, and not only expects, but eagerly desires, its accomplishment.”<sup>2</sup> Calvin’s observation is a critical one: the source of Mary’s obedience is not fear of God’s might, nor is it a legalistic adherence to His word; Mary’s obedience flows out of faithful love. *She is neither coerced nor commanded to obey*. At his very appearance, Gabriel greets Mary with words of joy, telling her to “Fear not” (Luke 1:30, KJV). Her *fiat* is an “agreement in love” in the form of obedience and receptivity: “the obedience of the body to its heavenly Head, being receptive to His will, His suggestions, His slightest movement.”<sup>7</sup> She takes on her task cheerfully, as Calvin suggests, embodying the “cheerful giver” whom “God loves” (2 Cor. 9:7, NASB). This cheer, however, in no way detracts from the profound faith of Mary, nor does it make flippant the weightiness of her charge. As we have seen, these are the starts of her dramatic *kenosis* – she claims “to herself in no other way the prerogative of such great grace than that she might do what was commanded her. For about to bring forth One meek and lowly, she was bound herself to shew forth lowliness.”<sup>8</sup>

It is required of the contemplative, too, that he be joyfully “docile, that he be soft and malleable in the hand of the divine Potter.”<sup>9</sup> To pray, to converse with God, is to open oneself to His will with the totality of being, receiving in humility “the word implanted” (James 2:21,

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<sup>6</sup> Hans Urs von Balthasar, *Prayer*, trans. Graham Harrison (San Francisco: Ignatius Press, 1986), 104.

<sup>7</sup> *Ibid.*, 103.

<sup>8</sup> Ambrose and St. Thomas Aquinas, *Catena Aurea, Vol. III: St. Luke*, trans. and ed. John Henry Cardinal Newman (London: The Saint Austin Press, 1999), 36.

<sup>9</sup> von Balthasar, *Prayer*, 103.



NASB). Awe and love meet in the contemplative's own *fiat* – this is why “Thy kingdom come” follows “Hallowed be thy name” (Luke 11:2, KJV). In meditation and prayer God is always addressing and confronting the believer's will; having heard the voice of God, “we are to obey his word ... we are called to life-transforming obedience because we have encountered the living God of Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob.”<sup>10</sup> Such willful docility, seeking unity with God's will, entails active participation in Heaven's “intense life and spontaneous activity,” for the eternal reality of that kingdom becomes through contemplation “a reality here and now, for mankind and for the world.”<sup>11</sup> As we shall see in the latter half of this chapter, this means that devotion and action are inseparable: the devotion of the heart leads the intellect to action.<sup>12</sup>

Just as with Mary, the contemplative's own daily *fiat* is grounded in love. Loving union with God's will produces freedom: “Nothing is as free as love; apart from love, all so-called freedom is no freedom at all.”<sup>13</sup> Obedience is both demanding and simple – the simple surrender of the will demands the surrender of the whole, and yet this brings freedom. For “simplicity and freedom (which are to be found in love, and consist in love) grow side by side.”<sup>14</sup> The simple freedom of love must undergo purification, for it is only free if it is selfless.<sup>15</sup> The contemplative

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<sup>10</sup> Richard Foster, *Prayer: Finding the Heart's True Home* (San Francisco: HarperSanFrancisco, 1992), 149.

<sup>11</sup> von Balthasar, *Prayer*, 104.

<sup>12</sup> *Meditations on the Life of Christ*, trans. Isa Ragusa and Rosalie B. Green (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1961), 262-263.

<sup>13</sup> von Balthasar, *Prayer*, 128.

<sup>14</sup> *Ibid.*, 132.

<sup>15</sup> *Ibid.*, 128.

must pass through fires of renunciation that refine and deepen his love,<sup>16</sup> not unlike Dante whose freedom Virgil affirms at the top of Mount Purgatory:

The temporal fire and the eternal,  
have you seen, my son, and you have come to a  
place where I by myself discern no further. ...  
No longer await any word or sign from me: free,  
upright, and whole is your will, and it would be a  
fault not to act according to its intent.  
Therefore you over yourself I crown and mitre<sup>17</sup>

The contemplative strives to, like Dante and Mary, align his will with God's in loving submission. In doing so, he is then free to pursue his own will, for it is one with the Father's. This is the whole of Christ's life; every *fiat* echoes Jesus' continual Yes to the Father. "Thy will be done" is "the prayer that Jesus wrests from himself in his death agony on the Mount of Olives. The center of Mary's Yes lies in the very center of the Son, but it does not disappear into it ... Christ's Yes and Mary's Yes are fully intertwined."<sup>18</sup> The grace of God is that both are in free surrender: the one assents to the Passion, the other to the Incarnation. The miracle of this grace sets the Father apart from all other gods: He neither commits filicide (as Saturn does), nor is He a raping deity (such as Jupiter). Rather, He allows his children to willfully submit their wills, growing in love and obedience as they encounter His word.

#### *Blessed One: A Beatitude from Christ*

While Luke contains no other instance of Mary's obedience as great as her *fiat*, Christ praises her as a hearer and keeper of God's word twice more in Luke. The first occurs in the

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<sup>16</sup> Ibid.

<sup>17</sup> Dante Alighieri, *The Divine Comedy of Dante Alighieri, Volume II: Purgatorio*, ed. and trans. Robert M. Durling (New York: Oxford University Press, 2004), XXVII.127-129, 139-142.

<sup>18</sup> Hans Urs von Balthasar and Joseph Cardinal Ratzinger, *Mary: The Church at the Source*, trans. Adrian Walker (San Francisco: Ignatius Press, 2005), 119-120.

eleventh chapter of the Gospel, preceded by two passages of great interpretive relevance. First, Jesus delivers the Lord's Prayer to his followers and teaches on God's faithfulness in answering His children's prayers (Luke 11:1-13). Then, after he casts out a demon, some there accuse him of casting "out demons by Beelzebul, the ruler of the demons" (Luke 11:14-15, NASB). He proceeds to refute them by teaching on unity and division: "Any kingdom divided against itself is laid waste; and a house divided against itself falls" (11:17). He then condemns them by the faith of their children; that is, his disciples to whom he had just previously given such authority to in verses 17-22:<sup>19</sup> "And if I by Beelzebul cast out demons, by whom do your sons cast them out? So they will be your judges" (11:19). Following this he delivers a frightful proclamation: "He who is not with Me is against Me" (11:23).

It is at this point a woman in the crowd interrupts him, raising her voice and crying, "Blessed is the womb that bore You and the breasts at which You nursed" (Luke 11:27, NASB). Christ replies to this seemingly random interjection by correcting her: "On the contrary, blessed are those who hear the word of God and observe it" (11:27-28). To some, it may seem that Jesus is shifting the blessing from his mother to all who hear and obey God's word. Hans Urs von Balthasar takes up this position: "Jesus shifts the focus away from what Mary has and can thus offer to what one receives and may only keep as a gift."<sup>20</sup> This is a fine reading of the passage, but it leaves the reader open to a dangerous assumption: because Jesus seems to shift the focus and blessing to the many who hear and keep the word of God, he is denying Mary's blessedness. Instead of reading it as an expansion, some may fall prey to reading it as a denial: "'Blessed is the womb that bore You...' 'No, the womb, the breasts, and she whom they belong to are not

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<sup>19</sup> Chrysostom, *Catena Aurea Vol. III*, 403.

<sup>20</sup> Hans Urs von Balthasar, *Mary for Today*, trans. Robert Nowell (San Francisco: Ignatius Press, 1988), 70.

blessed. On the contrary, blessed are those...” Not only does this reading lack subtlety and attention to the text, but it also ignores the context of the event. Just previously, Christ was teaching that a house divided could not stand. Though he is speaking metaphorically concerning possession, I believe we may also read this teaching into his own life. He would not immediately then divide the house of his mother by denying her blessedness. In “this answer He sought not to disown His mother, but to shew that His birth would have profited her nothing, had she not been really fruitful in works and faith,” particularly in the work of hearing and keeping the word of God in faith.<sup>21</sup> He is correcting the *focus* of the woman’s blessing, not shifting its recipient; he blesses Mary rightly (as well as those others who hear and keep God’s word). She is blessed not by the inherent holiness of her womb or breasts but because, as we have seen in the *fiat*, “she has most perfectly ‘heard the word of God and kept it;’”<sup>22</sup> Christ who lived within her womb and suckled at her breasts also lives “spiritually within her.”<sup>23</sup> Her body is not simply blessed for being “the temporal minister of the Word becoming incarnate,” but is even further blessed because “she remained the eternal keeper of the same to be beloved Word.”<sup>24</sup>

Earlier, in verse 19, Christ places his detractors’ children as their judges. This incident is conceptually analogous with his implicit blessing of Mary. In the first, the children’s faith judges their parents, and their parents are condemned. Christ also judges Mary’s faith, and the result of his judgment is her proper exaltation for her right hearing and faithful obedience. The contrast established by this parallel continues into verse 20. Christ now casts “out demons by the finger

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<sup>21</sup> Chrysostom, *Catena Aurea Vol. III*, 409.

<sup>22</sup> von Balthasar, *Mary for Today*, 41.

<sup>23</sup> John Calvin, *Commentary on a Harmony of the Evangelists, Matthew, Mark, and Luke: Vol. II*, trans. Rev. William Pringle (Grand Rapids: WM. B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 1949), 87-88.

<sup>24</sup> Bede, *Catena Aurea Vol. III*, 409.

of God,” which is the Holy Spirit.<sup>25</sup> Conversely, Christ himself is formed within Mary by the Holy Spirit coming upon her (Luke 1:35). Just as the works of Christ mean that the “kingdom of God has come upon” Israel, so too has the kingdom of God come in Christ to the world through the Virgin’s womb (Luke 11:20, NASB). This is again a testament to the unity of the Virgin’s will with the Father’s. *Any* kingdom divided against itself is laid waste, therefore the kingdom of God is one founded on communion as Mary’s will is consonant with God’s.

The contemplative takes part in the same communion, and thus takes heed of Christ’s correction. The believer is not blessed solely for the qualities by which he serves God; in fact, these alone do not reckon one as righteous. Theology and exegesis, for instance, “can border on prayer, but they are not of themselves necessarily” explicitly prayer, as von Balthasar observes (a weighty note from one of the centuries greatest theologians).<sup>26</sup> A church “sustained by ethics, good works, social consciousness, and the liberation” of the downtrodden, if void of worship, is “essentially a caricature of the communion of saints.”<sup>27</sup> All Christian life must be accompanied by an openness to worship; the faithful are commanded to “pray without ceasing” (1 Thess. 5:17). Abraham is reckoned as righteous because of his obedient faith,<sup>28</sup> and by a similar faith – as seen also in Mary – the contemplative seeks to be one of the “sons of Abraham” (Gal. 3:7, NASB). Mary honors God as she bears Jesus in her womb and suckles him at her breast, but it is her hearing and keeping of the word that brings her blessing.

### *The Family of the Lord*

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<sup>25</sup> Cyril, Augustine, and Athanasius, *Catena Aurea Vol. III*, 403-404.

<sup>26</sup> von Balthasar, *Prayer*, 116.

<sup>27</sup> Hans Urs von Balthasar, “Catholicism and the Communion of Saints,” trans. Albert K. Wimmer, *Communio* 15, no. 2 (1988): 167.

<sup>28</sup> See Gen. 15:6; Rom. 4:2-3, 9, 20-22; Gal. 3:6-7; James 2:22-23.

In his *Harmony of the Evangelists*, Calvin lists the woman's interrupting blessing in the same section as a narrative to which it "bears some resemblance," guiding us to the second instance of Jesus implicitly praising Mary.<sup>29</sup> It is found in Mark 3:31-35, which reads:

Then His mother and His brothers arrived, and standing outside they sent word to Him and called Him. A crowd was sitting around Him, and they said to Him, "Behold, Your mother and Your brothers are outside looking for You." Answering them, He said, "Who are My mother and My brothers?" Looking about at those who were sitting around Him, He said, "Behold My mother and My brothers! For whoever does the will of God, he is My brother and sister and mother."<sup>30</sup> (NASB)

Some interpret Christ's response to the news that his mother and brothers stand as a rebuke.

Calvin says that Jesus' words "were unquestionably intended to reprove Mary's eagerness" and that he is "disparaging the relationship of" those of his "flesh and blood."<sup>31</sup> Chrysostom says in one homily (though he seems of a different opinion in other writings) that Christ "accordingly answers as it were rebuking them."<sup>32</sup> The New American Standard Bible even lists the passage in Matthew under the heading "Changed Relationships" (others list it as "Jesus' True Family"). However, Jesus "does not disown His mother (as some heretics say, eagerly catching at His speech,)"<sup>33</sup> for he "said not, Go and say unto her, She is not My mother."<sup>34</sup> Though Calvin categorizes Jesus' words as a reproof, he does not think them an accusation of any pride or ambition, but dismisses such conjectures because "the testimony of the Spirit everywhere

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<sup>29</sup> Calvin, *Commentary Vol. II*, 90.

<sup>30</sup> See also Matt. 12:46-50; Luke 8:19-21.

<sup>31</sup> Calvin, *Commentary Vol. II*, 90.

<sup>32</sup> Chrysostom, *Catena Aurea Vol. III*, 273.

<sup>33</sup> Ambrose, *Catena Aurea Vol. III*, 274.

<sup>34</sup> Chrysostom and St. Thomas Aquinas, *Catena Aurea, Vol. I: St. Matthew*, trans. and ed. John Henry Cardinal Newman (London: The Saint Austin Press, 1999), 476.

bestows commendation on her distinguished piety and modesty.”<sup>35</sup> This is not a familial break; in Matthew and Mark it follows the same previously mentioned passage that teaches that a divided house will fall, again bolstering the interpretation that Jesus is seeking inclusion, not such acute familial division. Furthermore, I argue that this is not a rebuke of Jesus’ family. He is not denying Mary and his brothers, but rather admitting “all his disciples and all believers to the same honourable rank, as if they were his nearest relatives.”<sup>36</sup> This is not a rebuke of his family, but an approbation of his followers by naming them as family on account of their faithful obedience.

Yet, I believe Jesus does even more in this instance than merely raise his disciples to the honorable rank of family; he establishes his mother as an ideal of one who submits and follows the will of God. As with the incident of the corrected blessing in Luke, he shows that she is worthy of honor “not only because she bore Christ, but on account of her possessing every other virtue.”<sup>37</sup> Quite contrary to rebuking her, Jesus honors her and gives her to his disciples as a model. As his disciples are praised for being obedient to the will of God, Jesus could have expressed a preference for “His Apostles to His kindred” by telling the audience that they *and his kindred* should be as *disciples* and do God’s will.<sup>38</sup> Instead, he tells the listeners that his disciples have gained the title of mother, brother, and sister by doing God’s will. He is eager for them to have a “just opinion” of “His mother,” and thus raises “her to such a height” for the fact that she

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<sup>35</sup> Calvin, *Commentary Vol. II*, 90.

<sup>36</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>37</sup> Theophyl. and St. Thomas Aquinas, *Catena Aurea, Vol. II: St. Mark*, trans. and ed. John Henry Cardinal Newman (London: The Saint Austin Press, 1999), 70.

<sup>38</sup> Jerome, *Catena Aurea Vol. I*, 477.

considers “Him as her Lord.”<sup>39</sup> Jesus implicitly praises Mary for her obedience in the Luke 11 passage, and here he sets her as an ideal of loving obedience; an ideal that his disciples have achieved.

As a reader of this word, the believer today sits among this audience. He too may be honored as a brother of the Lord by doing the will of God. He receives Mary as the model of obedience and seeks to embody her faithfulness. He even, as we shall see, becomes a sort of mother of the Lord as well as obedience and action meet in the free and loving submission of his will to the will of God.

*“And, behold, thou shalt... bring forth a Son” : Bearing the Fruit of Christ into the World*

Mary’s fourth meditative virtue is the natural successor to her third: having faithfully heard and obediently accepted and kept the Word of God in her heart, she bears the fruit of that Word into the world. The previous virtue is submission resulting in conception; this one is nurturing the product of that docility to the point of birth. It is epitomized when Gabriel tells Mary she will “bring forth a Son” as well as in the first line of Mary’s Magnificat: “My soul doth magnify the Lord” (Luke 1:31,46, KJV). We see it first in Mary’s spiritual fecundity, which her physical fruitfulness evidences, as she is the example of how to “give birth” well to God’s Word. Then, the verses leading up to and of the Magnificat further express what it means to be a bearer of God, a *theotokos*.

*The Seed in Good Soil*

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<sup>39</sup> Chrysostom, *Catena Aurea Vol. III*, 274.



Adrienne von Speyr writes that as the seed of the Word that Mary received ripens (we speak here both in spiritual and physical terms), the “greater becomes the power of her fruitfulness to let it ripen further,” so that as she continues to give physical strength and nourishment she also continually receives the same spiritually.<sup>40</sup> This entails that at birth, she “is not separated from the fruit which she brings forth,” but rather she continues to be mother and bearer of God’s Word.<sup>41</sup> This also is why the two previously discussed passages (Luke 11:28; Mark 3:34) regarding obedience to God’s will should be read as implicit blessings of Mary: her spiritual fruitfulness continues after Jesus’ birth. This is born both of her obedience, and of God’s word, for He blesses and fills wherever he sends it:

For as the rain cometh down, and the snow from heaven, and returneth not thither, but watereth the earth, and maketh it bring forth and bud, that it may give seed to the sower, and bread to the eater: So shall my word be that goeth forth out of my mouth: it shall not return unto me void, but it shall accomplish that which I please, and it shall prosper in the thing whereto I sent it. (Isa. 55:10-11, KJV)

The word God sends by Gabriel and the Holy Spirit both accomplishes what He pleases, succeeding *in* the place where he has sent it, but it also brings spiritually prosperity *to* the place He has sent it. The rain of heaven brings a crop, and the crop blesses those who tend it. That is, Christ grows to God’s glory and blesses Mary in his growth. The good soil of her heart is enriched by his presence, and she shall also enjoy the fruits of eternal life he brings.

Joseph Cardinal Ratzinger finds an intimate connection between this passage in Isaiah and the Lord’s Prayer (Luke 11:2-4; Matt. 6:7-13). He suggests that the Gospel passage “explains how men can become fruitful soil for God’s Word” as well: by prayer.<sup>42</sup> Just as good

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<sup>40</sup> Adrienne von Speyr, *Handmaid of the Lord*, trans. E.A. Nelson (San Francisco: Ignatius Press, 1985), 36.

<sup>41</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>42</sup> von Balthasar and Ratzinger, *Church at the Source*, 14.

soil allows organic life to grow because it incorporates into itself organic matter, believers become “themselves a word formed by the penetration of the Word.”<sup>43</sup> This is a fertile cycle (like Isaiah describes): they become “good soil” *for* God’s Word by prayerfully taking *in* His Word and giving themselves to His will. Mary has received God’s Word fully into the whole of her person. Von Speyr writes that as her prayer is now united and filled by the prayer of her Son (for his very being is perfect prayer), she enters into “a time of perfect contemplation” in her pregnancy, a time of “exhaustive listening to the Son.”<sup>44</sup> However, it is simultaneously a “time of action, for she goes to Elizabeth to bring her the Son, to pass on the gift that she has received from God.”<sup>45</sup>

*“A Performance of Those Things”*

Upon Mary’s arrival, immediately preceding the Magnificat, Elizabeth both blesses Mary as she approaches and delights in the unborn John the Baptist’s leap at Mary bearing Jesus nearer to him. Elizabeth’s blessing ends: “And blessed is she that believed: for there shall be a performance of those things which were told her from the Lord” (Luke 1:45, KJV). She first praises Mary’s faith and her deference born from it: “blessed is she that believed.” Then, Elizabeth makes the direct connection between Mary’s belief and her bearing a Son: “for there shall be a performance of those things.” This is the connection between the previous contemplative virtue and the present one. Ambrose reflects on the same verse: “But happy are ye also who have heard and believed, for whatever soul hath believed, both conceives and brings

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<sup>43</sup> Ibid.

<sup>44</sup> von Speyr, *Handmaid*, 52.

<sup>45</sup> Ibid.

forth the word of God, and knows His works.”<sup>46</sup> The hearing in obedience and bearing are interwoven: to know the works of God in obedience is to be a doer of them. Mary did not doubt, “but believed, and therefore the fruit of faith followed.”<sup>47</sup> Mary conceives the Son “first with her spirit and then with her body,” and “hence she also bore him ‘first with her spirit and then with her body.’”<sup>48</sup> Obedient faith necessitates both spiritual submission, and dutiful action. Ambrose notes that in Mary’s *fiat* “You have her submission, you see her wish” when she surrenders with her “Be it unto me,” while declaring herself “*handmaid of the Lord*, signifies the readiness of duty.”<sup>49</sup>

The physical bearing of Christ as fruit of obedience is vital to both Christian doctrine as well as the contemplative life. Doctrinally, this stands against heresies regarding Christ’s Incarnation. Calvin notes that the “word *conceive* is enough to set aside the dream of Marcion and Manichæus: for it is easy to gather from it that Mary brought forth not an ethereal body or phantom, but the fruit which she had previously conceived in her womb.”<sup>50</sup> The conception of Christ is not solely spiritual, “He is conceived in the flesh, and carried in the womb for the space of nine months.”<sup>51</sup> The orthodox understanding of the Incarnation leads to the contemplative understanding: for while it is a great mystery, the believer far better enabled to meditate on the nature of Jesus, a man (albeit the God-Man), than a fully ethereal mystery. The relative is able to encounter the ultimate, not as a god in disguise acting human, but as “the apex of the world in its

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<sup>46</sup> Ambrose, *Catena Aurea Vol. II*, 41.

<sup>47</sup> Ibid.

<sup>48</sup> von Balthasar, *Mary for Today*, 41.

<sup>49</sup> Ambrose, *Catena Aurea Vol. II*, 36.

<sup>50</sup> Calvin, *Commentary Vol. I*, 35.

<sup>51</sup> Geometer, *Catena Aurea Vol. II*, 29.

strivings towards God,” forging “a path for all of us.”<sup>52</sup> He is the “great high priest” who can sympathize with the weaknesses of man, and thus man in all his weakness may “draw near with confidence to the throne of grace” in prayer and eternity (Heb. 4:14-16, NASB).<sup>53</sup>

Drawing near in prayer, the contemplative must bear Christ first in his spirit, and then bodily through his actions just as Mary conceived the Son “first with her spirit” in her loving obedience and “then with her body.”<sup>54</sup> Hans Urs von Balthasar writes that the “brotherly love” that “flows from contemplation” is “an active love.”<sup>55</sup> Prayer, then, results in a good birthing in which the contemplative’s soul is formed to be more like Christ, and as Christ grows within him, the believer bears forth Christ into the world by action. However, Ambrose notes that “all are not as Mary, that when they conceive the word of the Holy Spirit, they bring forth; for some put forth the word prematurely, others have Christ in the womb, but not yet formed.”<sup>56</sup> Mary is the ideal of this “good birth” of prayer, she “represents that contemplation which is turned toward heaven: fructified by it, she can enter upon the activity of bringing to birth, of effective motherhood.”<sup>57</sup> By pursuing this Marian ideal, the contemplative becomes a mother of Christ, as Christ says his disciples are in Mark 3. For those “who hear the word of God *and do it*,” that is bear it in action, “are called the mother of our Lord, because they daily in their actions or words bring Him forth” as Mary does.<sup>58</sup> This action by the contemplative is born of his own

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<sup>52</sup> von Balthasar, *Prayer*, 170.

<sup>53</sup> See also Heb. 1:1-3, 2:14-18.

<sup>54</sup> von Balthasar, *Mary for Today*, 41.

<sup>55</sup> von Balthasar, *Prayer*, 216-217.

<sup>56</sup> Ambrose, *Catena Aurea Vol. II*, 29.

<sup>57</sup> von Balthasar, *Prayer*, 287.

<sup>58</sup> Bede, *Catena Aurea Vol. II*, 274, emphasis added.

*fiat*: it is from “the contemplative vision and the great Yes to God’s entire, eternal truth that a person’s mission grows.”<sup>59</sup>

### *Magnifying the Lord*

In addition to bearing Christ physically, Mary also bears God spiritually. Just as her body allows for the Lord’s physical increase, her soul too “doth magnify the Lord” (Luke 1:46, KJV).

Origen writes on the meaning of this phrase:

*My soul doth magnify the Lord* . . . if I consider that the Lord our Saviour is the image of the invisible God, and that the soul is created according to His image, so as to be an image of an image, then I shall see plainly, that as after the manner of those who are accustomed to paint images, each one of us forming his soul after the image of Christ, makes it great or little, base or noble, after the likeness of the original; so when I have made my soul great in thought, word, and deed, the image of God is made great, and the Lord Himself, whose image it is, is magnified in my soul.<sup>60</sup>

The soul’s magnification of God involves an adjustment to make its image more “after the likeness of the original.” Luther agrees with Origen on the transformative nature of such a magnification of God. He writes that such “faith has life and being; it pervades and changes the whole man; it constrains you to fear if you are mighty, and to take comfort if you are of low degree.”<sup>61</sup> Mary’s obedience, hitherto expressing itself in a gentle timidity, now has resulted in a “strong ardor and exuberant joy with which all her mind and life are inwardly exalted in the Spirit.”<sup>62</sup> The same humble cheer of the *fiat* continues, but now contained within the more majestic Magnificat. Her contemplation (*contemplatio*) led to “the act of direct, personal and

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<sup>59</sup> von Balthasar, *Prayer*, 288.

<sup>60</sup> Origen, *Catena Aurea Vol. II*, 42.

<sup>61</sup> Martin Luther, “The Magnificat,” in *Luther’s Works*, ed. Jaroslav Pelikan (St. Louis: Concordia Publishing House, 1956), 306.

<sup>62</sup> *Ibid.*, 302

existential encounter” with God in her miraculous virginal pregnancy, and “hence to worship (*adoratio*)” – her song displays the virtue of love.<sup>63</sup>

Mary continues, “And my spirit hath rejoiced in God my Saviour. For he hath regarded the low estate of his handmaiden” (Luke 1:47-48a, KJV). This line alludes back to her pronouncement of herself as “handmaid of the Lord” in Luke 1:38. Though Christ grows within her spiritually and physically, she remains humble. She continues to maintain “that lowliness which in the Scriptures is particularly praised as one of the virtues, is called by the philosophers ‘modestia.’”<sup>64</sup> Though her ardor may have increased, her pride has not. The next portion of the Magnificat shows just as much: “for, behold, from henceforth all generations shall call me blessed. For he that is mighty hath done to me great things; and holy is his name” (1:48b-49, KJV). Mary, “touched by the Holy Spirit,”<sup>65</sup> anticipates the misconception exemplified by the interrupting mis-blessing of Luke 11. Mary does not claim she shall be blessed for her own sake, for true humility never knows that it is humble,<sup>66</sup> but instead because “he that is mighty hath done” great things to her. This is in keeping both with the character of Mary and the tone set by the first line of the Magnificat.

Luther writes that Mary does not lay hold on any esteem for herself, but that “she magnifies God alone and gives all glory to Him... For though she experienced such an exceeding great work of God within herself, yet she was ever minded not to exalt herself,” for to do so, Luther observes, would make her “like Lucifer.”<sup>67</sup> The comparison is an apt one: for Lucifer’s

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<sup>63</sup> von Balthasar, *Prayer*, 249.

<sup>64</sup> Origen, *Catena Aurea Vol. II*, 44.

<sup>65</sup> Metaphrastes, *Catena Aurea Vol. II*, 44.

<sup>66</sup> Luther, “The Magnificat,” 315.

<sup>67</sup> *Ibid.*, 308.

name comes from the Latin *lūcifer*, literally meaning “light-bearing,”<sup>68</sup> as Satan is referred to as the “star of the morning” – that star (actually the planet Venus) which rises before the Sun, trying to claim its glory for his own (Isa. 14:12, NASB). However, Mary as *theotokos*, the God-bearer, claims none of God’s glory for herself. There is no pride in her such as that which brought Satan to “fall from heaven like lightning” (Luke 10:18, NASB); no pride of Eve by which “death came into the world.” Rather, in “the lowliness of Mary should be opened the entrance into life,”<sup>69</sup> a lowliness which claims no greatness for itself due to its participation in God’s redemptive work.

The Magnificat as well bears much importance in contemplative prayer. Luther teaches that the Magnificat is in part a gift to us as well, to follow Mary in singing.<sup>70</sup> He writes that when we esteem God in our souls as Mary does, “All words and thoughts fail us, and our whole life and soul must be set in motion, as though all that lived within us wanted to break forth into praise and singing.”<sup>71</sup> Thus the Christian contemplative must be sure that all his meditative prayers “always lead him back to the act of direct, personal and existential encounter, and hence to worship.”<sup>72</sup> There is no excess of love for God; the Christian seeks to magnify Him in the greatest proportion. Worship necessitates action, for now that God has entered humanity, worship must too take on flesh: active love follows adoration (Titus 1:16; 1 John 4:8). Christians are charged to prove themselves “doers of the word, and not merely hearers who delude

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<sup>68</sup> “Lucifer, n.,” Oxford English Dictionary Second edition online version, last modified September 2011, <http://www.oed.com/view/Entry/110847>.

<sup>69</sup> Bede, *Catena Aurea Vol. II*, 44.

<sup>70</sup> Luther, “The Magnificat” 301. See also 298, 308-309, 355.

<sup>71</sup> *Ibid.*, 307.

<sup>72</sup> von Balthasar, *Prayer*, 249.

themselves” (James 1:22, NASB), for faith and works are intertwined, each empty without the other (2:14-26). As we have seen, those who hear the word of God and do it are raised to the status of “mother” (Mark 3:35), because “they daily in their actions or words bring Him forth as it were in their inmost hearts.”<sup>73</sup> Without bearing such fruit, the contemplative is not a mother; his own Magnificat is no song if it remains unsung; good soil is that which brings growth, not merely holds a seed within. Yet, in all works, the praying Christian should also seek to embody the humility found in Mary’s Magnificat, accounting all good things to the Father.

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<sup>73</sup> Bede, *Catena Aurea Vol. III*, 274.



## CHAPTER FOUR

### The Praying Bearer of God and Body of Christ

Having examined Mary's meditative virtues with a particular eye to the contemplative, I will now examine how prayer following the Marian ideal illuminates the life of the entirety of the Christian Church. The prayers of one member of this Body are not isolated, but rather the prayers of the whole Church buttress them. In turn, the prayers of each member join the Church's prayer. The united Body of the Church across time, space, and doctrinal disagreements is a Body offering a unified prayer; the communion of saints is a communion of prayer. The Church, at its bedrock, is a praying Church. Just as the praying faithful who form it ought to pursue the Marian meditative ideal – obediently receiving, pondering, and bearing forth the Word of God in self-emptying humility – so too does the Church take the contemplative form of the Mother of God.

*“... the holy catholic Church, the communion of saints”*

The phrase “I believe in ... the holy catholic Church” is found in the “great confessions of the Apostles’, Nicene, Chalcedonian and ‘Athanasian’ Creeds,” which Christians have professed for almost two millennia.<sup>1</sup> For many Protestants this term has raised concerns, as it seems to be an affirmation of the Roman Catholic Church. These concerns lead to the substitution of “Christian” or “universal” for “catholic.” However, a

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<sup>1</sup> D.H. Williams, *Retrieving the Tradition and Renewing Evangelicalism: A Primer for Suspicious Protestants* (Grand Rapids/Cambridge: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 1999), 221.

deeper understanding of catholicity is vital to understanding the unity of the Church, and therefore its role as a God-bearing and praying Church.

As D.H. Williams notes, the term “catholic church” was first used by the early church “Fathers” – the two or three generations of church leaders following the apostles – around 115 A.D.<sup>2</sup> For the Fathers, the meaning of “catholic” extends far beyond being simply being a synonym for “universal” or “general.”<sup>3</sup> Catholicity does express the harmony of the Body throughout the world, but just as importantly it emphasizes that the Church is comprehensive in its message: it gives “a wholeness of faith that offers the complete counsel of God to all peoples in all times and places.”<sup>4</sup> In this sense, catholicity is more selective than unmitigated universality. Williams writes that the “inclusive character of catholicity is based, not on a kind of all-in-corporation of diversity that invites theological syncretism or dilution, but on the reception from God of a unique message and gift that transcends any one history or location.”<sup>5</sup> The catholic Church, then, encompasses many of the diverse pluralities of orthodox Christianity, but it is not a permeable body that incorporates all who identify themselves as Christian. It is the embodiment of Christ’s prayer in John 17: that those who believe in him through the word of his disciples “may all be one” so that the world may believe that he was sent *by* the Father in unity *with* the Father (John 17:19-21 NASB). The present fragmentation of

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<sup>2</sup> Williams, *Retrieving*, 86. It is Ignatius and Polycarp who first use the term around this time. Ignatius was the second pastor of Antioch, where believers were first called “Christians,” and Polycarp was reputedly a disciple of the apostle John.

<sup>3</sup> *Ibid.*, 225.

<sup>4</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>5</sup> *Ibid.*, 226.

the Church attests to the fact that the “catholic principle is both a present reality and an eschatological hope.”<sup>6</sup>

The present reality of the catholic Church confronts both excessively rigid hierarchicalism and compartmentalizing individualism. As Curtis Freeman and Miroslav Volf argue, the former diminishes “the significance of local congregations” by overemphasizing “the unity of the Godhead rather than the economic relations of the divine persons,” resulting in an ecclesial monism corresponding to the singularity of the Divine.<sup>7</sup> This can be the tendency of the Roman Catholic and Orthodox churches. Conversely, Protestantism and the Evangelical or Free Church traditions tend towards an excess of individualism. Hans Urs von Balthasar critiques this individualism as one in which salvation becomes centered not on Christ’s holiness being exchanged for the Church’s (i.e. his people’s) sinfulness upon the Cross, but instead is given for the justification of the individual sinner by faith, resulting in “an obvious loss of the communion of saints.”<sup>8</sup> For the word of God is not meant for simply individual contemplation, instead it “is the holy people which is the hearer of the word; the individual Christian, the praying person, only exists as a member of this people.”<sup>9</sup> Freeman and Volf agree that thinking of faith in “highly individualistic terms” results in a

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<sup>6</sup> Ibid., 228.

<sup>7</sup> Curtis Freeman, “Where Two or Three Are Gathered: Communion Ecclesiology in the Free Church,” *Perspectives in Religious Studies* 32, no. 3 (Fall 2004): 260-261. See also Miroslav Volf’s *After Our Likeness: The Church as the Image of the Trinity* (Grand Rapids/Cambridge: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 1998), 71-72.

<sup>8</sup> Hans Urs von Balthasar, “Catholicism and the Communion of Saints,” trans. Albert K. Wimmer, *Communio* 15, no. 2 (1988): 166.

<sup>9</sup> Hans Urs von Balthasar, *Prayer*, trans. Graham Harrison (San Francisco: Ignatius Press, 1986), 87.

privatized spirituality, an “atomistic individualism that underlies contemporary congregational life.”<sup>10</sup>

Following Volf and Freeman in couching the discussion of ecclesiology in terms of the Trinitarian dynamic, any dialogue mediating the two ecclesial pitfalls must seek to echo the mystery of the Trinity in the body of the Church. Jesus prays that his disciples, and all who follow them in his truth, may be one even as he and the Father are one (John 17:11 NASB). Christ prays that his people may be taken up into his relationship with the Father, and thus that the Church will take a Trinitarian shape. This means there can be no excess of intimate individuality or singular unity: the intimacy of the Son and the totality of God are by no means antithetical, one cannot supersede the other. As Dietrich Bonhoeffer writes, the companionship of a fellow Christian is “a physical sign of the gracious presence of the triune God.”<sup>11</sup> The Church then will emulate the Trinitarian community’s perichoretical embrace,<sup>12</sup> and it does so in the communion of saints. Von Balthasar agrees that any talks of unity and ecumenical discussion will fail “until the ecclesial aspects of faith and order have become united with the aspect of the *communio sanctorum*.”<sup>13</sup>

The practice which binds this communion, and which is our chief concern, is prayer. Even in the most profound instances of its individuality, prayer continues to be a communal action in the context of the communion of saints. Even when the Word of God

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<sup>10</sup> Freeman, “Where Two or Three,” 261, 267.

<sup>11</sup> Dietrich Bonhoeffer, *Life Together*, trans. John W. Doberstein (New York: HarperCollins, 1954), 20.

<sup>12</sup> Freeman, “Where Two or Three,” 261.

<sup>13</sup> von Balthasar, “Catholicism,” 167-168.

comes to a person praying in solitude, it “seems to be attended and borne along by countless others praying with him,” the “new” word to the individual is the same word treasured and contemplated in the hearts of vast numbers of people.<sup>14</sup> It is the same word before which countless saints have bowed in worship, the same word that forms and reforms their lives. It is at the hearing of the word of God that the contemplative may utter a surrendering “Yes,” just as Mary did at God’s word from Gabriel. In doing so “all who have ever heard and uttered this Yes, and all who ever will, in time and eternity, incline toward” the present member, united in the will of God and in “the fulfillment of the kingdom of heaven.”<sup>15</sup> Here is a reflection of Christ’s prayer in John 17: he prays that all who hear his word may be one; in praying upon hearing his word, the hearers are joined as one communion.

### *The Praying Church*

The praying communion that the contemporary contemplative enters into is not merely spiritual or “otherworldly.” It is a concrete and present reality, encountered physically at the distinct instances of the Church in this world. These members, along with the faithful of the ages, join together in the prayer of the Church, and the individual contemplative, too, incorporates the understanding he gains in solitude with the Church’s communal understanding.<sup>16</sup> There are millions who pray in the world, “but all their prayers are gathered up into the one, all-embracing,” *catholic* prayer of the Church.<sup>17</sup> As

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<sup>14</sup> von Balthasar, *Prayer*, 85.

<sup>15</sup> *Ibid.*, 102.

<sup>16</sup> *Ibid.*, 89.

<sup>17</sup> *Ibid.*, 100.

a weak voice is emboldened in a choir, so too does the Church's "great, secure prayer" buttress the "tentative, stumbling prayer of the individual" both when he joins in praying with the community as well as when his prayers are offered in private.<sup>18</sup> Unlike a simply musical choir, a person "does not leave his place in the choir of the praying Church when he goes to his room to contemplate," rather he carries on the Church's communal prayer in another, though no less real or effective, form.<sup>19</sup> Thus, the communion of saints is not something vaguely sacramental or broadly anonymous that the contemplative joins at times, oscillating between isolation and homogenized anonymity as he contributes his own prayers to the Church's "treasury of prayer."<sup>20</sup> Rather, the communion of saints "operates in a personal and expressly individual way" – it meets the singular person who prays without falling into individualism and incorporates him into the Church's contemplative catholicity without crossing into homogeneity.<sup>21</sup>

It is in contemplation, then, that we encounter one of the great acts of unity within the Church, the vast depth and intricacy of the intertwining communion of saints. The "Church is the original contemplative,"<sup>22</sup> and mysteriously the contemplative "*is* 'Church'; he participates in the universality and the boundless vitality of the Church, which pulsates through all the members." This vitality pulsates through him in his hearing of the Word, meditating upon it, and resounding it in his heart so that he is

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<sup>18</sup> Ibid.

<sup>19</sup> Ibid., 101.

<sup>20</sup> Ibid., 102.

<sup>21</sup> Ibid.

<sup>22</sup> Ibid., 84.

informed alongside all the saints “with faith, love and hope.”<sup>23</sup> Hearing the Word of God is made possible by the presence of other Christians. Dietrich Bonhoeffer calls this the “goal of all Christian community” – that they gather together to “meet one another as bringers of the message of salvation.”<sup>24</sup> He writes further:

God has put this Word into the mouth of men in order that it may be communicated to other men. When one person is struck by the Word, he speaks it to others. God has willed that we should seek and find His living Word in the witness of a brother, in the mouth of man. Therefore, the Christian needs another Christian who speaks God’s Word to him ... He needs his brother as a bearer and proclaimer of the divine word of salvation. He needs his brother solely because of Jesus Christ.<sup>25</sup>

The Word of God strikes the individual and in this mystical reception, he bears it, meditates upon it, carries it, and then brings it forth into the world by proclaiming it to others. This act is distinctly Marian. For there is a “profound unity which exists between the act of contemplation, which lovingly takes the word into its very being, and the act of the Virgin Mother, Mary.”<sup>26</sup>

#### *The Church: A Body of Theotokoi*

In 431 AD the Council of Ephesus decisively and solemnly confirmed Mary’s title as the Mother of God,<sup>27</sup> or *Theotokos* (Θεοτόκος), “since by the power of the Holy Spirit she conceived in her virginal womb and brought into the world Jesus Christ, the

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<sup>23</sup> Ibid., 88.

<sup>24</sup> Bonhoeffer, *Life Together*, 23.

<sup>25</sup> Ibid.

<sup>26</sup> von Balthasar, *Prayer*, 88.

<sup>27</sup> For further reading on the history of the term *Theotokos*, a term seemingly original to Christianity, I recommend the fourth chapter of Jaroslav Pelikan’s *Mary Through the Centuries* (Yale University Press, 1996).

Son of God, who is of one being with the Father.”<sup>28</sup> The term *theotokos*, literally “God-bearer” or “the one who gives birth to the one who is God,”<sup>29</sup> is a statement that sets itself in “the doctrine of grace and redemption.”<sup>30</sup> It acts almost as “a seal upon the dogma of the Incarnation, in which the Word truly assumes human nature into the unity of his person, without cancelling out that nature.”<sup>31</sup>

As we have seen, each member of the church plays the part of a *theotokos* (plural, *theotokoi*); each, like Mary, receives “the seed of the Logos into his soul and brings it to birth,” and in doing so “he is exercising a function of the *ecclesia*,” of the Church.<sup>32</sup> The genuine hearer of the Word “shares, at the level of being, in the Church’s very nature as Bride and Womb of the Word.”<sup>33</sup> Each member partakes in a dynamic cycle. They receive the Word, announced by another who plays the role of the angel Gabriel. They then bear this Word and contemplate it until, at a fruitful moment, they bear it forth into the communion where another brother or sister may too receive it as they did. They also interpret the Word into the world, exhorting others as Mary did at Cana: “Whatever he saith unto you, do it” (John 2:5, KJV).

In engaging in this cycle of outpouring, in which the intimately interior flows out and is received, everyone “within the communion of saints has something Marian” about

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<sup>28</sup> John Paul II, “Redemptoris Mater (The Mother of the Redeemer): On the Blessed Virgin Mary in the Life of the Pilgrim Church,” in *Mary in the Church: A Selection of Teaching Documents* (Washington, D.C.: United States Conference of Catholic Bishops, Inc., 2003), 95-96.

<sup>29</sup> Jaroslav Pelikan, *Mary Through the Centuries: Her Place in the History of Culture* (New Haven/London: Yale University Press, 1996), 55.

<sup>30</sup> Hans Urs von Balthasar, “The Marian Principle,” *Communio* 15, no. 1 (1988): 123.

<sup>31</sup> John Paul II, “Redemptoris Mater,” 96.

<sup>32</sup> von Balthasar, *Prayer*, 88.

<sup>33</sup> *Ibid.*, 88-89.



them.<sup>34</sup> They enter into a rhythm of outpourings between God and His Church that spans the redemptive history of Christianity, a sort of receiving-pouring dance that imitates the perichoretic Trinity. God fashions Eve from the rib of Adam's side to exist intimately, yet separately, as bone of his bone and flesh of his flesh (Gen. 2:21-24). Eve is a type of Mary, for Mary is considered the "Second Eve,"<sup>35</sup> just as Christ is the Second Adam.<sup>36</sup> Mary, as the second Eve, makes up for the first's disobedience by her obedience.<sup>37</sup> In this way, she becomes Christ's "true helpmate" and "the vessel of the Church."<sup>38</sup> First though, the nation of Israel flows from the side of Eve; the people of God come from her womb. God receives this outpouring back into Himself in His longsuffering compassion with man:

The Hebrew text of the Old Testament does not draw on psychology to speak about God's compassionate suffering with man. Rather, in accordance with the concreteness of Semitic thought, it designates it with a word whose basic meaning refers to a bodily organ, namely, *rah<sup>a</sup>mim*. Taken in the singular, *rah<sup>a</sup>mim* means the mother's womb. . . . the womb becomes the term for being with another; it becomes the deepest reference to man's capacity to stand for another, to take the other into himself, to suffer him [*erleiden*], and in this long-suffering to give him life. The Old Testament, with a word taken from the language of the body, tells us how God shelters us in himself, how he bears us in himself with compassionate love.<sup>39</sup>

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<sup>34</sup> Hans Urs von Balthasar and Joseph Cardinal Ratzinger, *Mary: The Church at the Source*, trans. Adrian Walker (San Francisco: Ignatius Press, 2005), 122.

<sup>35</sup> Pelikan, *Mary Through the Centuries*, 46. The entire third chapter offers an excellent historical understanding of the emergence and meaning of this parallelism.

<sup>36</sup> Rom. 5:12-15; 1 Cor. 15:20-25, 45-49.

<sup>37</sup> Irenaeus, *Proof of the Apostolic Preaching*, trans. Joseph P. Smith (Westminster, MD: The Newman Press, 1952), ch. 33 (p. 69).

<sup>38</sup> von Balthasar and Ratzinger, *Church at the Source*, 141.

<sup>39</sup> *Ibid.*, 78.

God keeps the nation of Israel in His side. It is then from this “womb” of God that the Word is proclaimed and poured into Mary, the long-sought Daughter of Zion.<sup>40</sup> She receives it and births it in the Annunciation and Nativity. Just as Eve is a type of Mary, Mary has been seen since the early Fathers as a type of the Church.<sup>41</sup> Thus, it is the Church that takes the next step in this dance. From Christ’s side on the cross, blood and water flow, symbolizing the origin and growth of the Church;<sup>42</sup> she is “born primarily of Christ’s total self-giving for our salvation.”<sup>43</sup> Continuously born of, growing in, and receiving this flow, the Church now takes her part in this dance of receiving-outpouring. She must look before her to know her part; she must look to Mary for example. The mystery of the Virgin Birth and “the mystery of the Church penetrate and illuminate each other perichoretically ... neither can be correctly situated and explained without the other.”<sup>44</sup> The Church is a *theotokos* of *theotokoi*, a bearer of God composed of God-bearers, a contemplative unity offering its singular prayer in communion with the multitudes of her praying members. We established that the Church models itself after the Trinity; it must also partake in a shadowy imitation of the continuous and communal Divine dynamism. To know the steps of this dance, the rhythm of its motion, the Church and her praying members follow the lead of their predecessor in faith and contemplation. They must follow the lead of the *Theotokos*.

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<sup>40</sup> See Ps. 9:14; Isa. 52:1-3; 62:11; Mic. 4:8,10; Zeph. 3:14; Zech. 2:10-11; 9:9.

<sup>41</sup> Ibid., 141-142.

<sup>42</sup> Paul VI, *Lumen Gentium* (1964), I.3.4-5.

[http://www.vatican.va/archive/hist\\_councils/ii\\_vatican\\_council/documents/vat-ii\\_const\\_19641121\\_lumen-gentium\\_en.html](http://www.vatican.va/archive/hist_councils/ii_vatican_council/documents/vat-ii_const_19641121_lumen-gentium_en.html). See also Augustine in Aquinas’s *Catena Aurea Vol. IV: St. John*, 589.

<sup>43</sup> *Catechism of the Catholic Church* (Vatican City: Libreria Editrice Vaticana, 1993), 766.

<sup>44</sup> von Balthasar and Ratzinger, *Church at the Source*, 141.

For the Church to take on such Marian form, she must be simultaneously a pure, holy, and blameless bride as well as a fecund mother. The first is figured in Mary's virginal purity; Paul writes that he betrothed the Corinthians (and all Christians) "to one husband" so that he might present the church to Christ "as a pure virgin" (2 Cor. 11:2, NASB). Such sanctification is enabled by Christ's Passion, so "that He might present to Himself the church in all her glory, having no spot or wrinkle or any such thing; but that she would be holy and blameless" (Eph. 5:25-27, NASB). This purity allows for receptivity of the Word, for the "pure in heart ... shall see God" (Matt. 5:8, KJV). As we have seen, reception of the Word entails cultivating it to fruition and bearing it to others. This is the mystical paradox of the Virgin-Mother, "this is why the Church herself is a Marian mystery. There can be fruitfulness in the Church only when she has this character, when she becomes holy soil for the Word."<sup>45</sup> Repeatedly, Paul writes that the Church should "bear fruit" in Christ who multiplies the seed and increases the harvest of the faithful (Rom. 7:4; 2 Cor. 9:10 NASB).<sup>46</sup> Jesus exhorts his disciples to such pure receptivity and fertility in the parable of the sower. The soil that yields "a hundredfold" after being sown is "those who, hearing the word, hold it fast in an honest and good heart, and bear fruit with patience" (Luke 8:8,15, NASB). Such soil is Marian soil: obedient receptivity, patient pondering within the heart, and bearing the word fruitfully. As each member of the body prays in such a way, the soil of the Church will be both virginal and maternal. Such sanctification is accomplished through prayer, patience, and grace. The

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<sup>45</sup> Ibid., 16-17.

<sup>46</sup> See also John 15:16; Col. 1:10.

idea of a congregation joining in the hymn by Handt Hanson offers a superb illustration of this:

Lord, let my heart be good soil, open to the seed of your Word.  
Lord, let my heart be good soil, where love can grow and peace is understood.  
When my heart is hard, break the stone away.  
When my heart is cold, warm it with the day.  
When my heart is lost, lead me on your way.  
Lord, let my heart, Lord, let my heart,  
Lord, let my heart be good soil.<sup>47</sup>

### *Conclusion: Praying Wholeness*

The brokenness of the Church causes consternation to many men and women today. Frequently, she is seen as divided; at war with herself, even. Many Christians lament the historical events that have rent her, from the Great Schism of 1054, dividing East and West, to the Protestant Reformation beginning five hundred years later, to the more recent divisions in the Anglican Communion in 2003. There is little doubt that the Church – the Body of Christ – is broken, just as her Lord’s body was. There can be no return to wholeness, “Protestants and Catholics alike must learn how” discover and rediscover “that we are Christ’s body,” albeit a broken one.<sup>48</sup>

Brokenness, though, is not disunity. A broken body is still one body. To be united as the Body of Christ, through Christ’s blood, means that each Christian takes part in a great and holy communion of saints. Joining in the great singular prayer of the Church as individual people who pray, in both community and solitude, will bring the faithful to a

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<sup>47</sup> Handt Hanson, “Lord, Let My Heart Be Good Soil” (1985), in *With One Voice: A Lutheran Resource for Worship* (Minneapolis: Augsburg Fortress, 1995), #713.

<sup>48</sup> Stanley Hauerwas, “What Could It Mean for the Church to Be Christ’s Body? A Question Without a Clear Answer,” in *In Good Company: The Church as Polis* (Notre Dame, IN: University of Notre Dame Press, 1995), 27.

greater discovery of this vast unity. In taking up this “duty of prayer,” any and “every degree of assistance toward the discharge of it will be always acceptable to pious minds,”<sup>49</sup> with Mary offering assistance in the form of an exemplar, given to God’s people by His Son.

We see demonstrated in Mary the height of obedience as she utters her *fiat*, declaring herself a willing handmaiden of the Lord. When confronted with these miraculous mysteries, she ponders them in her heart with patience. Her reception of the Word is both measured and intimate; she receives it bodily and spiritually with delicacy, and she ruminates upon it. Her soul magnifies the Lord; He grows within her heart and womb. At the fruition of His Word, she bears forth a son into the world. This moment of childbirth is a self-emptying of what has grown within her, but her life is a continuous magnification of the Lord, receiving and pouring out his Word. Her heart is pierced: as she bore the pain of his birth, she encounters the pain of his death. United “with Him in the likeness of His death,” she also receives the joy of his resurrection, and is filled again with his Holy Spirit at Pentecost (Rom. 6:5, NASB).<sup>50</sup>

Just as Mary did, the contemplative must cultivate a receptive obedience towards God’s Word. All his prayer should center around the “Thy will be done...” of the Lord’s Prayer, not merely out of abject submission, but with the joyous yearning of heart that his will may be united with God’s. In such surrender, he both loses himself and finds himself; he finds his identity anew in Christ. His heart, like the Virgin’s, is pure: washed by baptismal waters and by meditation on the words of Scripture, it is alluvial, rich and

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<sup>49</sup> Isaac Watts, *So Amazing, So Divine: A Guide to Living Prayer* (Brewster, MA: Paraclete Press, 1997), ix.

<sup>50</sup> See also Phil. 3:10-11

ready to bear the seed of the Word. He meditates upon the word with a depth beyond simple study – the intimate maternal depth of a mother bearing a child, the resounding depth of a *theotokos*. He has laid the word of God, the depth that calls to the depth of men’s souls (Ps. 42:7), so intimately in his heart and soul (Deut. 11:18), that the sorrows of the Crucifixion pierce his heart, like Mary, and the joy of the Resurrection brings him to marvel and worship as the disciples did (Matt. 28:9; Luke 24:41). The contemplative then actively shows forth the fruit of his contemplation into the world, though he goes as a “sheep in the midst of wolves” (Matt. 10:16, ESV),<sup>51</sup> rejoicing in his sufferings (Col. 1:24).<sup>52</sup> He goes not alone, however, but joined together with all the saints, united in the will of God, and therefore in prayer.

The Church is not a community of praying individuals, but it is a praying unity. This is the miracle of Pentecost: those who are individuals “together in one place” become one body continually devoting itself to prayer (Acts 2:1,42 NASB). Repeatedly Paul writes that though “there are many members” there is “but one body” (1 Cor. 12:20 NASB).<sup>53</sup> The Church *is* because it, like Mary, has heard the Word of God and been shaped by it. Though it is broken and divided, the people of the Church may re-realize the communion they share by modeling their contemplation after Mary. However, the Marian ideal of prayer will not mend the Church; the hands of the Master Carpenter alone can do that.

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<sup>51</sup> See also Luke 10:3.

<sup>52</sup> See also Matt. 5:10-12; Acts 5:41; Rom. 5:3; 1 Pet. 4:13.

<sup>53</sup> See also Rom. 12:5; 1 Cor. 10:16-17; 12:12-15; Eph. 2:16; 3:6; 4:4, 25; Col. 3:15.

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