

The Faith of Mary in Scripture

Only one passage in Scripture associates Mary with the noun πίστις, “faith” in Greek, or the verb πιστεύειν, “to believe.” This passage is Luke 1:45, which reads: “Blessed is she who believed—ἡ πιστεύουσα (aor. ptc. fem.)—that there would be a fulfillment of what was spoken to her from the Lord.” Here, the crucial point about Mary’s faith is that Mary is not praised for having believed in a set of doctrines or a dogma, but rather because she trusted the word of God. She trusted God to keep his promise. In other words, this passage is describing her faith as trust. Now, because the term “faith” is connected with Mary in only this verse in all of Scripture, the only way to gain further insight into her faith is by considering parallels drawn from other passages.

One of these parallels concerns the very first word of Luke 1:45: μακαρία. This word places the praise and proclamation of Mary’s faith within the context of a *macharism*, or a beatitude:

“*Blessed* is she...” The English translation, “blessed” does not render the meaning of μακάριος correctly, for this Greek adjective actually means “happy”—*beatus* in Latin; hence the word “beatitude,” rather than “blessing.” Because a *macharism* entails the promise of happiness and the promise of a concrete reward, we may conclude that Mary’s faith leads to a reward of happiness.

The other only instance in the gospels where the adjective μακάριος is associated with the verb πιστεύειν is found in John 20:29, where the risen Jesus says to Thomas, “Blessed are those who have not seen and yet believe.” Not only does this verse contain the last beatitude proclaimed by Jesus in the gospels, but it also refers to faith. So, when we look at the gospels as a whole, we notice that the first and last beatitudes come from above—from Elizabeth filled with the Holy

Spirit and from the risen Jesus—and that both are about faith in Jesus. And from the first beatitude to the last, we can trace a progression from Mary to all the future disciples of Christ—that is, from an individual to a whole group. Thus, in the gospels, we can identify a narrative that starts with the faith of one person and culminates with the faith of many. From this perspective, Mary’s faith appears to be the origin or starting point of faith in Jesus, and even the archetype of it. Grammatically, Elizabeth’s sentence—“Happy is *she who believed...*”—uses a feminine aorist participle (ἡ πιστεύουσα) that can be translated as “the believing one.” Mary is *the* believing one par excellence in the new context brought about by the Incarnation.

Right after having been proclaimed “happy” by Elizabeth, who was filled with the Holy Spirit, Mary, filled with the Lord, acknowledges that “all generations will call me happy” (Lk. 1:48). The reason why is not limited to just her faith. Rather, her faith, her trust in God, is part of the unlimited extension of her happiness. In other words, there is a recognition by Mary herself, while filled with the Lord, that her happiness will become a reference point for all to come.

Now, the circumstances at the beginning and end of this narrative are quite different. In John 20, Thomas is reproached for having not trusted his fellow apostles when they reported the apparition of their risen Lord. But we also notice a shift in the words of Jesus to another understanding of faith in the sense of holding true something that is revealed, but imperceptible through the senses. To an extent, this dimension of faith is also present at the Annunciation, where Mary too holds to a truth that was revealed to her from above, but she cannot see at the time. From this viewpoint, Jesus, in John 20, sanctions the exemplarity of Mary’s faith at the Annunciation.

Despite these similarities, there are also differences. We stated at the outset that Mary's faith is first of all faith as trust. We could say the same about the faith that the risen Jesus expects from his disciples. Thomas, for example, should have trusted the witness of the other apostles. The object of such trust, however, is quite different than the object of Mary's trust. For the faith of the disciples in John 20 is about a past event; it looks back. Although Thomas did not see the apparition of the risen Jesus that took place a week earlier, that the other apostles did see and witness. On the other hand, the faith of Mary, praised by Elizabeth in Luke 1, is about something to come; it looks ahead. Nobody has seen it yet. When Mary believes, there is no other witness, no one else to rely on—not even the Old Testament prophets, for none of them explicitly announced that the Messiah to come would be conceived by a virgin. So, Mary can only trust the message from God. She can only trust God.

Through this trust, Mary shows herself to be a true daughter of Zion, especially as one reflects on אָמֵן, 'mn, the Hebrew verb "to believe." In its *hifil* form, this verb means "to trust, to place one's confidence in." Our liturgical "amen" derives from this Hebrew verb. It is interesting to note that אָמֵן also describes a child's sitting on someone's lap. For a child to sit willingly in the lap of an adult, usually a parent, implies a deep sense of trust and confidence. In the same way, faith as trust is based on an interpersonal relationship. Although one can certainly believe in a dogma, one can place one's trust only in a person and, as a consequence, in that person's word. In this sense, faith implies some previous knowledge or experience of the person to be trusted. The Magnificat, in Luke 1:46-56, indicates that Mary knew something of God's plan, for her song is replete with excerpts from the Scriptures.

Because Mary already knew God and something of his plan, she was trusting. The question she asks the angel Gabriel at the Annunciation—“How shall this be?” (Lk. 1:34)—reflects this. Her question does not express any sort of doubt, as it may appear before it is contrasted with Zechariah’s question to the same angel: “How shall I know this?” (Lk. 1:18). For Zechariah receives a different reply from the angel: “And behold, you will be silent and unable to speak until the day that these things come to pass because you did not believe—οὐκ ἐπίστευσας (aor. 2nd pers. sing.)—my words, which will be fulfilled in their time” (Lk. 1:20). Mary’s question provokes no punishment because, unlike Zechariah, Mary does not doubt the angel. Rather than questioning whether his words will come to pass, she wonders how they will happen. She is just curious; she wants to learn and know more.

The trust, or faith, manifested by Mary is not blind. When the risen Jesus says to Thomas, “Blessed are those who have not seen and yet believe,” he does not ask his disciple to show blind faith either. Blind faith is credulity, faith without reason. Thomas had reason to believe: Jesus had spoken of his passion and resurrection to his disciples before the events unfolded (e.g. Jn. 14:18-19). Likewise, Mary has some reason to trust the angel, to trust the word of God. Of course, the angel Gabriel appeared to her, but delivery by an angel was not sufficient for Zechariah to put his trust in what Gabriel was telling him. Mary, for her part, does believe in Gabriel’s word. Her knowledge of the history of salvation allows her to understand that what Gabriel is disclosing to her is consonant with what she knows about God and his plan. As a matter of fact, the function ascribed to the angel Gabriel when he is introduced in Scripture—in the book of Daniel—is to bring understanding to those to whom he is sent (Dan. 9:22).

The Magnificat, echoes Elizabeth's praise, her *macharism*, of Mary's faith. Elizabeth, filled with the Holy Spirit, has just recognized in Mary the mother of her Lord (Lk. 1:43), thus adding more understanding to what is happening to her younger relative. At that point, Mary knows more than she did when Gabriel left her. Her trust in the angel's word receives some confirmation. We pointed out that Mary expresses her joy at the fact that, "all generations will call her blessed (v. 48)—μακαριοῦσίν (fut. of μακαρίζω, "to call someone blessed")." Here, Mary is the object of a second *macharism*, though foretold by herself, by her who is now even more confident that the word of God delivered to her by the angel will indeed happen.

The beginning of the Magnificat manifests Mary's joy (vv. 47-48a). She trusted the word of God, and she realizes that she was right in doing so, as the *macharism* proclaimed by Elizabeth confirms. The promise of happiness is being implemented. Mary is indeed bearing the Lord. And, as far as she is concerned, her own fate has been turned upside down: Since her Son, according to the angel Gabriel, will inherit the throne of his father David and will rule over the house of Jacob forever (Lk. 1: 32-33), she, Mary, the girl of Nazareth, will be exalted as the First Lady of this new kingdom. As witnessed by 1 Kings 2:19, the First Lady of Israel, was the Queen Mother (*gebirah*): the King had several wives but only one mother, and both mother and son shared the same blood.

The Magnificat can thus be regarded as Mary's reaction to and interpretation of the Annunciation, after receiving the light shed by Elizabeth. When she concludes her song, Mary regards the things told—λελαλημένοις (pf. ptc. pass. of λαλέω; Lk. 1:45)—to her by the angel as the fulfillment of what God said—ἐλάλησεν (aor. of λαλέω; Lk. 1:55)—to Abraham before. The

word of God expressed through the call of Abraham occurs at the beginning of a story that culminates with the word of God reaching Mary at the Annunciation.

Filled thus with borrowings from the Old Testament, the Magnificat portrays a Mary who is quite familiar with Scripture and its content, in particular the history of salvation. It reveals how Mary connects what happens to her with the history of salvation, which she interprets from her particular situation, her particular point of view. The Magnificat then is a sort of Marian digest of the history of salvation from Abraham to Mary. The aorist or past tenses contained in verses 51-53 (God “has shown strength with his arm;” “has scattered the proud;” “has put down the mighty from their thrones;” “has exalted those of low degree;” “has filled the hungry with good things;” “has sent away the rich empty”) may be understood as expressing past events, or describing God’s customary way of acting (“gnomic” aorist), or prophetically treating the future as already present. As Mary’s interpretation of the history of salvation, the Magnificat can be regarded as Mary’s creed, as an authentic expression of trust in God, as Mary’s confession of faith. Its context is the episode of the Visitation, in which Elizabeth too, filled with the Holy Spirit, confesses her faith in the presence of her Lord in Mary’s womb. The Visitation narrative contains another creed, Elizabeth’s, spurred by the coming of Mary. Mary’s faith, expressed by her “yes” at the Annunciation, is contagious—contagious immediately, from its very beginning.

The Magnificat is not only a memory of God’s salvific acts, but also a prophecy that God will continue to act in this way, that God is faithful. It expresses Mary’s trust in God because of her knowledge of him. Consequently, Mary’s faith is no blind faith. Her knowledge of God is based on her recollection of God’s past deeds. As she reflects on them, she draws the conclusion that they are God’s customary way of acting. Therefore, God can be trusted. Moreover, even though

the angel Gabriel speaks of a divine action without precedent, his message is still in line with God's customary of acting. This is why Mary can see in the Incarnation and in what God is doing with her the fulfillment of what God told Abraham and did with him. In recalling Abraham and the word spoken to him by God, Mary affirms her trust in the fulfillment of the divine promises, her trust in the plan of God that fulfills. Her Magnificat is indeed a creed.

Because a creed is a summary meant to highlight one's main beliefs, it is selective. For instance, the so-called Nicene Creed that we recite at Sunday mass makes mention of Pilate, but not Peter, Paul, or Israel. In a similar way, the Magnificat refers to only one Old Testament figure, Abraham. Mary identifies what is happening to her with what happened to Abraham. He is a person with whom she resonates. Abraham, the founding father of the people of God, is remembered as a man of faith. His faith is even recognized by God himself: "And he put his faith in the Lord, and he reckoned it to him as righteousness" (Gen. 15:6). Abraham's faith, like Mary's, is above all a trust in God, not faith in a doctrine. God promised to the childless old man that his descendants would be as many as the stars in heaven. And Abraham trusted that God would keep his promise and fulfill it.

Interestingly, God made this promise in answer to a question from Abraham: "What will you give me?" (Gen. 15:2). The question was spurred by a statement from God, who had just said, "Your reward shall be very great" (Gen. 15:1). Hence, Abraham's trust in the word of God was also motivated in part by the hope for a reward. This reward, moreover, was the dearest one possible for the old and childless Abraham, namely descendants, something only God could give him. Among the reasons why Abraham put his faith in the Lord was self-interest. Abraham's faith was not a disinterested faith.

Neither was Mary's. In her Magnificat, she praises God for putting down the mighty from their thrones and exalting those of low estate. This action applies to Mary's fate very concretely, not just symbolically. As we noted before, when Mary is proclaimed "blessed" by Elizabeth speaking under the **inspiration** of the Holy Spirit, this *macharism*, this beatitude, contains the promise of happiness. We have also observed that when Mary is told that her Son would inherit the throne of David and reign forever, she is exalted because she has been promised to become the First Lady of an everlasting kingdom. Given the fact that honor was the highest social value in ancient Israel, becoming the Queen Mother was the highest human achievement that a girl in Israel could have ever dreamt of. In this way, Mary is like Abraham, whose dearest human dream was to eventually have a countless descendants. In both cases, the trust put in the fulfillment of God's word was not disinterested. God made it easier for them to trust his promise.

This self-interested dimension of faith, of trust, is not limited to Abraham or Mary. In the gospel, Jesus frequently makes statements like "your faith has made you well" (Lk. 8:48; 17:19; 18:42) to people who have put their faith in Jesus for very self-interested purposes: They want Jesus to cure them. They trust that Jesus can give them the reward they are hoping for. Now, these sick or disabled people who put their trust in Jesus often differ from Abraham and Mary in an important way: It is they who approach Jesus, whereas it is God who approaches Abraham and Mary. In other words, these sick or disabled people take the initiative out of self-interest.

At a quite different level, something similar can be said about Abraham. By the time that God calls him in Genesis 12:1 to leave his country, to leave his father and to go to Canaan, Abraham had already done and was on his way, according to the last verses of Genesis 11 (i.e. vv. 31-32).

There seems to be some convergence between the human initiative of Abraham and the divine initiative of God. It was as if Abraham had anticipated God's call without being aware of it. God's call, however, will give Abraham's initiative a totally new and enlarged dimension. Abraham's "yes" to the divine call is an act of faith, an act of trust, but it is not blind because it echoes or sheds light on something that was already present in Abraham, however hazy or dim this something might have been. If trust requires previous knowledge, then it adds not only a reward, new knowledge, a new understanding; it illuminates. Is there then for Mary, as is the case for Abraham, some initiative or movement of hers preparing for the irruption of God's plan into her life, some kind of anticipation of it?

It is quite possible. Some commentators have said that Mary's question—"How shall this be?"—reveals that she has taken a kind of vow of virginity. On the other hand, Mary's Magnificat echoes the canticle of Hannah, who wanted desperately to become a mother (1 Sam. 2:1-10). In borrowing passages from the canticle of Hannah, Mary too expresses her joy at becoming a mother. Hence, evidence exists to support the idea that this young Jewish girl may have harbored both desires in some way. But to combine the desire to become a mother with the desire of a total consecration to God, body and soul, through a kind of vow of virginity, would amount to longing for something that is humanly impossible to achieve. For God, however, nothing is impossible, says the angel Gabriel (Lk. 1:37).

Did Mary know, even before the Annunciation, that God would solve her dilemma? Scripture gives no support to such an interpretation. Yet, without going as far as to posit some vow of virginity undertaken by Mary, the parallel with Abraham, who is already moving to Canaan when God asks him to do so, may suggest that Mary too has already been moving in the direction that

the angel asks her to go. Such an interpretation does not require Mary to have a clear vision of God's plan for her before the angel appears to her. Suffice it to postulate that she had some early perception, a premonition, or even a vague idea of God's plan, and that she adhered to it and made it her own in case it might happen to her. The verb she uses (γένοιτό, "be it done," in Lk. 1:38) in her answer to the angel is in the optative mood, which expresses a desire. Like for Abraham, there is a convergence of a human project or aspiration with the divine plan. This convergence rests both on the self-knowledge of Mary and on a knowledge and understanding of God and his way of acting. This combined knowledge contributes to the fact that she is able to trust the divine message delivered to her by the angel. This message confirms Mary's aspiration, as hazy or unfocused as it may have been, and increases her knowledge.

But this knowledge is not full knowledge, whether imparted to Mary by the angel's words or by some particular grace. Some commentators indeed think that the "fullness of grace" (the Latin *gratia plena* of Lk. 1:28 in the Vulgate) entails all graces including the beatific vision that Mary would have enjoyed at the moment of the Annunciation. If Mary had enjoyed the beatific vision, speaking of her faith would be very different: On the one hand, faith seems to be irrelevant in front of the beatific vision; on the other hand, faith in the sense of trust as adhering to someone (recall the original meaning of *ʾmn* in Hebrew) could be experienced even by someone enjoying the beatific vision. To speak of a Mary enjoying the beatific vision at the Annunciation is, however, rather speculative and is not supported by the biblical narrative. Mary's "yes" is not based on full knowledge of God's plan, only on partial knowledge, sufficient though to make her "yes" valid.

Mary is aware of this, as her question to the angel suggests. She realizes that Gabriel has not revealed everything to her, and she hopes to increase her knowledge of God's plan. Mary's faith or trust thus allows for questions too. Even after Mary asks her question, the angel does not disclose everything about Jesus to her. For instance, nothing is said about the passion or the resurrection of her Son to be conceived. Later, she will actually not understand what the twelve-year-old Jesus will tell her in the Temple (Lk. 2 :50). But Mary believes in God; she trusts God, so her "yes" to the angel is valid.

For her "yes" relies on God only, a God for "whom nothing is impossible." At that point, Mary can envision the fulfillment of her hazy double dream or her double aspiration that is so integral to her being. Her "yes" to God's message is an answer to a call that fulfills her. In placing her trust in God, in replying "yes" to him, Mary is rewarded with the happiness of becoming both a virgin and a mother—even of a multitude, as the parallel she establishes with Abraham's fate and hers suggests—of truly becoming the one she hoped to be, even if her hopes were still unfocused.

But this does not mean that her trust in the Word of God is final at the moment of the Annunciation. As her knowledge of the Word of God made flesh in her increases, her "yes" to him will acquire new dimensions with new consequences and, therefore, will be reinterpreted, reformulated, repeated. The Magnificat is also Mary's interpretation of what just happened to her. It expresses her understanding of both a series of past events (which confirm that the Word of God can be trusted) and a renewed understanding of what these events imply for the future.

The Magnificat illustrates the new knowledge of the Word of God that Mary has after her encounter with the angel Gabriel. It also indicates that, being familiar with God's plan in

Scripture, Mary had the desire to learn about this plan before she asked her question of the angel. This desire even becomes attached to her mission. On two subsequent occasions—the birth of Jesus and the finding of Jesus in the Temple—Luke makes clear that Mary “pondered” or “kept all these things in her heart” (Lk. 2:19.51). Repetition is a tool in biblical narrative intended to draw the reader’s attention to something relevant. These two passages show us a Mary who repeatedly works at connecting the dots, at making sense out of the meaning of the Incarnate Word after witnessing events she does not understand at first or may find painful to contemplate.

The gospel confirms that Mary’s trust, Mary’s faith is not exempt from a lack of understanding and not even from anxiety: “Behold, your father and I have been looking for you *anxiously*” (Lk. 2:48) and “they *did not understand* the saying which he spoke to them” (Lk. 2:50). Mary, however, does not give up. She continues to ponder “all these things in her heart” (2:51). In telling us that Mary keeps all these things in heart, Luke shows us that Mary’s trust in God, that Mary’s faith is a faith open to the future. Her faith is not a possession. Mary does not keep all these things in her heart in order to hoard and enjoy, like Uncle Scrooge McDuck who dives into a pile his own money. Mary’s faith does not imply any possession for it is founded on interpersonal relationships. Mary’s faith is not a gain, for a person is never possessed. Mary’s faith is a faith that keeps searching, that perseveres, that listens to, that allows itself to be taught.

And neither is “pondering things in one’s heart” simply about increasing one’s knowledge. According to biblical and Hebrew anthropology, the heart is not the seat of love as it is in modern day America (as found in “I ♥ New York” for instance). Rather, it is the seat of decision making. In other words, when Mary keeps all that she witnesses in her heart, she does so not only to make

sense out of it, but also to make the appropriate consequent decision. Faith as trust is not just a mental attitude. It leads to a commitment. It is present from the beginning, in Mary's "yes" to the message from Gabriel. It is as a consequence of this first "yes" that Mary conceives in her womb. Indeed, Elizabeth's *macharism* can also be read this way: "Happy is she who believed *because* (ὅτι, which can be causative and not only expletive) what was spoken to her from the Lord will be fulfilled." Mary's "yes" causes things to happen; fully, we may add. First comes trust, then decision, then action. It flows this way, but not without challenges. The joy of the Magnificat may overshadow the risk Mary took in giving her first "yes" to God without consulting with her fiancé, namely the risk of being repudiated and even stoned. Faith as trust flows then with ups and downs.

And these ups and downs continue until Mary's final "yes" to the Word of God. Various commentators have seen the expression of this final "yes" in Mary's presence at the foot of the cross on which her Son is dying. These commentators have seen there the height of Mary's faith, (or the night of it; see Abraham who is asked to slaughter his only son in Gen. 22:2). A difficult and painful moment in a mother's life, if ever there is one. This interpretation, however, entails quite a lot of deduction based on the mere presence of a mother at the death of her son, even if the Gospel of John is highly symbolical. At the cross, Mary does or says nothing. On the other hand, she is much more prominent and active at the wedding at Cana (Jn. 2:1-12), an episode where she is introduced first and where she takes the initiative. Unlike the episode at the cross, the events at Cana are driven by Mary. The Cana episode is therefore more likely to be regarded as expressing Mary's final "yes" to the Word of God.

The reason is the context given by the words “on the third day” introducing the narrative (Jn. 2:1). On the one hand, this expression looks ahead, at the passion and resurrection of Jesus. On the other hand, it also looks backward, which becomes clear when those three days are seen in continuity with the days enumerated in the previous chapter. After the prologue of the Gospel comes the testimony of John the Baptist (vv. 19-28). The *next day* (v. 29), John introduces Jesus. The *next day* (v. 35), John points Jesus to two of his own disciples. And the *next day* (v. 43), Jesus goes to Galilee, where he calls Philip. Consequently, four days are enumerated in chapter 1. And the wedding feast at Cana occurs three days later. So, the Gospel of John begins with an inaugural week, recalling the beginning of an earlier biblical book, namely the book of Genesis. The wedding feast at Cana takes place on the seventh day of this inaugural week, the same day reserved for God in the book of Genesis.

So, when Jesus tells Mary that his “hour” has not yet come, John is alerting his readers that Jesus’ hour in fact has come. In John’s Gospel, the hour of Jesus refers to the passion and resurrection, which fully manifests Jesus’ glorification, that is, his divine identity. At the end of the Cana episode, the Gospel states that Jesus revealed there “his glory, and his disciples began to believe in him” (Jn. 2:11). Now, Jesus is yet not experiencing his passion and resurrection, but as a consequence of his mother’s intervention, he acts in a way that initiates or anticipates those events. At Cana, Jesus begins to reveal a glory that will eventually be fully manifested at his passion and resurrection. The countdown has started. His hour has come indeed. The fact that Jesus was reluctant at first to admit it is consonant with his agony at Gethsemane: “Father, if you are willing, take this cup away from me...” (Lk. 22:42), another scene where Jesus will hope for another outcome.

Given this perspective, Mary is right when she expects a revelation of her Son's glory at Cana. Mary had to grow in the understanding of her Son, in her faith in the Word of God. There were times when it was rather easy, and there were times when it was more difficult. But after having pondered and re-pondered in her heart, Mary, at Cana, has developed a good understanding of God's plan and has come to the conclusion that it is time for her Son to manifest his glory, that is, to reveal his divine identity. In this regard, Mary is contrasted with the people of Nazareth who did not notice anything special in Jesus and lacked faith in Jesus (cf. Mk. 6:2-3, 6).

We may say further that, at Christmas, Mary, because of her initial "yes," has given birth to a Son in whom people could see a human being and that, at Cana, as a continuation and repetition of her "yes," she gives birth to a Son in whom people start to see a divine being, who will be fully manifested at his passion and resurrection. In John, and unlike Matthew and Luke, there is no infancy narrative reporting the birth of the human Jesus, but there, at the beginning of his Gospel, the Cana narrative reports something analogous, the launching of the divine Jesus. Both Christmas and Cana were triggered by Mary's faith.

At Cana, Mary's remark to Jesus—"they have no wine" (Jn. 2:3)—is significant in this regard. She does not say "they have no more wine" as if running out of wine were her only point. Rather, Mary's remark alludes to the absence of a wine that was not already present. She does not only allude to a shortage of wine, but also to a lack of wine. Besides the mention of the mother of Jesus at Cana in the context of the miracle of new wine, John also mentions her at the multiplication of the loaves in the context of the miracles of the bread of life (Jn. 6:42). Both are miracles anticipating the heavenly banquet.

The first of these two miracles—called “signs” in John—happens as a result of Mary’s initiative. After having pondered all these things in her heart, Mary made a decision: She stepped in. She does not make some sort of neutral statement about a shortage of wine. She wants the problem solved. Demonstrating this is the fact that, in spite of what looks like initially a rebuke from Jesus, she turns to the stewards, asking them to do whatever her Son will tell them (v. 5). Because she trusts that her Son has the power to rectify the situation and will use that divine power, Mary’s intervention at Cana is thus motivated by faith.

The parallel between the events at Cana and another episode reported in the Gospel of Matthew supports this interpretation of Mary’s faith. Found in Matthew 15:21-28, this other episode is the one about the miraculous healing of a Canaanite woman’s daughter in the region of Tyre and Sidon. The similarities to Cana are striking. Upon begging Jesus to intervene on behalf of someone else, an unnamed woman first experiences a sort of rebuff from Jesus: “I was sent only to the lost sheep of Israel” and “It is not right to take the food of the children and throw it to the dogs.” In spite of this harsh rebuff, she insists, and Jesus eventually grants the mother’s request and heals her daughter. As in the Cana episode, Jesus addresses the mother as “woman,” and a banquet is part of the story. Unlike John in the Cana episode, however, Matthew explicitly states why Jesus grants the Canaanite woman’s request: “O woman, great is your faith!” (noun πίστις, *pistis*; cf. Matt. 15:28). Jesus recognizes that this woman’s intervention is motivated by faith.

At Cana, such a statement is absent. But the parallel with the episode in Matthew, when added to what we have already observed about what might have prompted Mary’s intervention, provides some good reasons to conclude that Mary intervenes because she too is motivated by faith. It was pointed out that the first scriptural praise of Mary’s faith is proclaimed by Elizabeth in Luke 1:45.

We also observed that this praise takes the form of a *macharism*: “Happy are you...” Yet, in the Gospel of Luke, Mary is also the object of a last personal *macharism*: “While [Jesus] was speaking, a woman from the crowd called out and said to him, ‘Happy is the womb that carried you and the breasts at which you nursed.’ He replied, ‘Rather, happy are those who hear the word of God and observe it.’” (Lk. 11:27-28).

At Cana, Mary gives birth to the faith of Jesus’ disciples. This language of comparing the imparting of faith with the act of giving birth is very biblical. Paul applies it to himself several times as the founder of communities of faith (1 Cor. 4:15; Gal. 4:19; 1 Thess. 2:7; Philem. 10). If we identify John, the author of the homonymous gospel *and* letters, as the beloved disciple who receives Mary as his mother from Jesus hanging on the cross, we cannot but be struck by the way he addresses his readers in 1 John. He repeatedly calls them “small children” (2:1; 2:12; 2:14; 2:18; 4:4; 5:21) who are “beloved” (3:2; 4:1; 4:7; 4:11). It is as if, in the matter of the transmission of faith, of formation in faith, the beloved disciple learned from the mother whom Jesus had given him.

The person who gave birth to Jesus and who raised him—this is what the formula “the breasts at which you nursed” means—is, of course, his mother, Mary. If such a statement about nursing highlights how, in the biblical Jewish society, women were crucial not only because they brought forth their children, but also because they brought them up, then the *macharism* directed to Mary is not divine in its origin, either directly or indirectly. Jesus, therefore, gives it a divine origin by saying that, if Mary can be said to be happy, it is not primarily because she brought him forth and up, but because she listened to the word of God and acted upon it. Her “yes” given to the angel

Gabriel demanded a subsequent action from her. To say “yes” to the coming of child implies a commitment. And Mary will have to make other decisions in light of this commitment.

As a mother who acts on the “yes” she said to a new child—once Mary has given her initial “yes”, once she has trusted the word of God, once she believes that what God told her will actually happen—her other “yesses,” her decisions will have to conform with her initial “yes.” Her actions will be decided according to this initial “yes.” What Mary does in this regard after her initial “yes,” therefore, is eventually motivated by her faith. As Mary ponders what she witnesses in her heart, her faith is faith seeking understanding, so that her faith may be strengthened, in order for her to be, in turn, faithful to the word she has pronounced to the angel. If faith is trust, if faith is based on interpersonal relationship, then Mary’s trust in the word of God must be trusted too. God trusts Mary to conceive and carry his Son, to give him birth, to raise him well, to launch him into his public life, so that others may trust him, may believe in him.

That happens at Cana. There, the faith of Mary comes first, and at the end of the pericope, it becomes contagious: Others believe (ἐπίστευσαν) in Jesus (Jn. 2:11). For this reason, Mary’s faith is not merely first chronologically. It is also first in a foundational way. At Cana, Mary spurs Jesus to perform a sign that causes the disciples to have faith in him. Like Mary’s faith, the faith of the disciples will have to grow because simply witnessing a miracle is not sufficient to guarantee a solid, mature faith. Evidence that this is true is the fear experienced by the disciples when they see Jesus walking on the water toward their boat in the episode immediately after the multiplication of the loaves in John 6:20. Nobody with a grown up faith is present in the boat to strengthen the disciples’ own nascent faith. Hence the last *macharism* or beatitude of the Gospel

of John: “Happy are those who have not seen and yet believe” (Jn. 20:29). Although this beatitude is really directed at John’s readers, rather than Jesus’ listeners, Jesus reproaches Thomas his lack of faith when he should have relied on the faith of others.

This last *macharism* in the gospels should be contrasted with the first one, which was directed to Mary who believed not because she had seen, but because she had relied on others’ faith as witnessed in Scripture. Her trust, her faith is the result of a convergence of her knowledge of Scripture, herself, and, of course, God. Her faith in Jesus is first, both in a chronological and in a foundational way. Therefore, it is original, like Abraham’s faith. In John 1:12, “All who received him, [the Word of God] who believe in his name,” the verb λαμβάνειν, “to receive,” is used almost synonymously with πιστεύειν, “to believe.” As Jesus is leaving this earth, and as the beloved disciple “receives” Mary as his mother, the disciple is performing an act of faith, an act of trust. Some commentators would even say that becoming a child of Mary is to become a true believer (the other disciples have deserted Jesus). Mary’s motherly faith is at the origin of the faith or trust of Jesus’ disciples. As the faith of Abraham is the origin of the first people of God—Israel—and of its faith, the faith of Mary is the origin of the second people of God—the Church—and of its faith.