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# Consecrated Celibacy and the Mystery of Mary

Elizabeth Lang, O.S.U.

I am deeply honored to be here this evening. I come to you, not as an expert in Marian doctrine, but as a committed religious and as a woman who has related to Mary in different ways and on different levels during the past thirty years. I go back to age 10 because I suspect it was about this time that a real love and devotion to Mary was beginning to flourish in my life. Perhaps a brief sharing of the highlights of my personal relationship with Mary will be beneficial at this point. I can recall very vividly my times of fear and loneliness as I was "growing up"—those moments we all have as boys and girls when we become troubled or unsure, and I remember asking Mary to cover me with her mantle of peace and love and the positive reassurance this always gave me. So often I ask for this simple faith again, but that childlike belief is past. As a high school student and young religious I tried to follow St. Louis de Montfort's perfect devotion to Mary, and only God and Mary know how I succeeded. It was so easy during my first years of teaching in elementary school to talk about Mary. I shall never forget the year that my sixth and seventh grade boys begged me to let them be in charge of the May altar—the girls had always been the favored ones before. What a beautiful job they did!

As the years passed I struggled with the same problems that the Church and all of you contended with. Devotion to the Mother of God was not lost but was not uppermost either. We were so fearful "to take away from Christ." In my teaching of high school religion, Mary was still the ideal Christian woman, but the stress was different. No longer could the same methods be used. Devotion to Mary was not popular for the most part with high school girls, and it took much effort to convince them of Mary's importance and role in our lives. When Sister Elizabeth Cashman asked me to present this paper, I felt it was a real invitation by Christ and His Mother to set my sights clearly again.

The mystery and wonder of Mary as she lived her life was so great that we can find her as an ideal Christian married woman and an ideal woman religious. I am not implying by that statement that married women are not religious—I am just making the distinction between the married state and the religious state. In my judgment both are beautiful callings to a deeply spiritual life.

Consecrated celibacy and all that it entails may well be the only—certainly the biggest—difference between them. Mrs. Moorman has addressed herself to the married women so let us turn to Mary as the model of the 20th-century woman religious.

Mary was one of the *anawim*, one of the humble souls who staked all on Yahweh's promise. Their spirit was that of lowliness, openness, poverty, emptiness, but they possessed a readiness to do and be about God's will. Their secret was how to be little (but I add effective) in God's hands. The *anawim* had a sense of human powerlessness mingled with a strong trust in God. They were patient in waiting and had the clinging love of a child. In being open to God, they were also open to others. So much of their spirit I feel is reflected in the Beatitudes (Math. 5:3-6):

How blest are the poor in spirit; the reign of God is theirs. (The NEB translates: "How blest are those who know their need of God; the Kingdom of Heaven is theirs.")

Blest too are the sorrowing; they shall be consoled.

Blest are the lowly; they shall inherit the land.

Blest are they who hunger and thirst for holiness; they shall have their fill.

Blest are the single-hearted for they shall see God.

From just the few accounts we have of Mary in Sacred Scripture we can note how well she fulfills the qualifications of the *anawim*. Because of the knowledge and rich insights of tradition which have come down to us through the years, we tend to believe that Mary "really had it made." She was conceived without original sin, was told by an angel that she was going to be the Mother of God, etc. But we forget that Mary's call was similar to the loving invitation that God gives to all of us—a call to Faith, a total commitment to God's word—an openness and readiness to receive (the spirit of the *anawim*). She did question the angel ("How can this be since I do not know man?"). Therefore was she as certain of her role as we might think? She was fearful and concerned when her Son was lost! "Son, why have you done this to us? You see that your father and I have been searching for you in sorrow." Why was she so concerned, if she believed her Son to be the Second Person of the Blessed Trinity?

Many scholars today believe that it was not until Pentecost that Mary became fully aware of who Christ was and what His mission entailed. And yet she responded in faith to God's plan by her "fiat" and opened humanity to the "One who would reverse man's self-sufficiency by a life of obedience unto death, by a life lived among men as one who serves." This faith and openness to God's plan is the spirit of the *anawim* in its perfection. St. Augustine says, "Mary is more blessed in receiving the faith of Christ than in conceiving the flesh of Christ." Perhaps here is found the mystery of all virginity—pure and entire faith which is itself a gift of God and which relies on God for its fruitfulness—a fruitfulness often hidden and unsuspected. "Blessed are they who have not seen and yet have believed." St. Luke also supports this premise. Although he does not exclude any praise of Mary's celibacy, he prefers to focus attention on her faith, her total dedication of herself to God's salvific work. Faith could be called the "will to be saved."

Mary's Immaculate Conception is more than a mere fact—it is a saving truth. In and through it has been revealed the perfect solidarity or unity and intimacy of Our Lady with Jesus. This unity served as a preparation for her Divine Maternity and



the work of Salvation. Mary is a SIGN of all men's hopes and goals. And yet, Mary is the perfect example of the *anawim*.

In the interpretation of the Remnant tradition, closely associated with the *anawim* since they made up this Remnant, an important fact is to be noted. The Lord intended to single out from His Chosen People one small group to be the bearers of the Messianic Hope. This purification process ended in Mary. And so another aspect of the *anawim* is seen—they were the ones whom God favored—members of His *faithful* Remnant. They learned from their poor condition—learned dependence on the Lord and openness to His grace. They had trust in His love and providence. Because of their emptiness, not only of money and goods, but of true power and esteem, they heard more easily the voice of the Lord. As beloved of Him, they were constantly being called by their Lord. Each one's material poverty, however, was different because a certain level will teach dependence and openness to one, but a further level will destroy or preoccupy to the point of hindering a view of the Lord. Therefore, poverty, the spirit of the *anawim*, focuses on our call from the Lord and celibacy stresses man's response. Celibacy has an aspect of solitude and loneliness, but also includes an openness and spirit of expectation. It touches man in the very core of his love life, his response to others—has him bodily and spiritually consecrate himself totally to the Lord. It is incompleteness awaiting fruition . . . “and Mary pondered . . .”

Therefore, as we look back over the time before Christ, we see the importance and intimate connection between poverty and celibacy: the condition to be open to God's call—Poverty—and the ability to respond—Celibacy. At the threshold of the new era, the birth of Christ and the union of humanity with God was first accomplished in a decisive way in Mary and then in the Church. The mystery of Mary must always be within the greater mystery of the Church. She is the prototype of virginity in its ecclesial dimension. Her *Magnificat* proves her knowledge of Sacred Scripture and her reliance on God's work for nourishment and illumination. She pondered—she integrated those words with the experience of God in her own life. She went with haste to Elizabeth—she desired to share her good news with another in a deeply personal way. Within her own soul she encompassed the infinite longing of the poor of this world, that longing which forms the spiritual treasure of the people of God. In looking upon the poverty of his handmaid, God has lowered His gaze to rest upon the poverty of the people of the Exodus on their march toward the Promised Land. In Mary all the poverty and all the love of the past generations reach out to meet God and to receive Him in the Person of Jesus. In her the poor of Yahweh reach the end of their spiritual journey and enter directly into the kingdom of Christ. All generations proclaim her blessed because she stands at the center of the Salvation History of the Chosen People, at the very point where the Old Covenant becomes the New Covenant—where the suffering of the Old Testament meets and enters into communion with the poverty of Christ, who became poor for our sake that by His poverty we might become rich.

But Christ allows the mystery of Mary to continue down through the ages. Religious women today take her as their model. She is the mature Christian woman. I would like to emphasize and elaborate on that last word—WOMAN. Mary was a woman, not a naive young girl. As I said before she questioned the angel. Not because she doubted her God, but she wanted to know “How”? She was open to and responded to God all her life; so that at this invitation of God, she discerned His will and then responded with her “Fiat.” She lived through the pregnancy, the birth of Jesus, the early childhood, the loss in the temple, the loss of Joseph, the public life—pondering and responding “Fiat.” She stood at the foot of the Cross and wondered “Why”? but her response was always “Fiat.” Thirty-three years of not knowing exactly where it was all heading—yet during all this time, her Fiat. If Consecrated Celibacy is the ability to respond to God’s love, Mary has certainly shown us the way.

Now we must go one step further and ask ourselves: how can we become that mature woman—like Mary—who will be able to respond to the promptings of grace in our lives. We must take advantage of our 20th-century knowledge. Gordon Allport has listed six qualifications of a mature personality, which I believe are worthy of note here:

1. We must extend ourselves, become interested and involved in many different areas, broaden our environment.
2. We must be able to relate *warmly* and meaningfully to others; have a real impact on the relationship. People we meet are never exactly the same once they know us.
3. We must possess a fundamental emotional security and acceptance of ourselves. We are women and there is no reason to be sorry about it. (Sometimes I feel that women’s lib advocates are going about things in the wrong way. In their desire for equality they sometimes step off the pedestal which, I believe, they are on.) We are different, even if culture has made us so; we have a valuable contribution to make; we do need to be recognized as persons and given equal rights, but I believe femininity has qualities other than physical ones that masculinity does not have, and accepting them is a mark of maturity.
4. We must perceive, think and act *with zest* in accordance with outer reality. To me each phrase of that statement is important, especially for women religious. The enthusiasm we exhibit in sticking with the reality of the situation and not turning into our own fantasy can be of such help to the modern world.
5. We must be capable of self-objectification, of insight and *humor*. Again, how much Christian joy is needed in the world today!
6. We must live in harmony with a unifying philosophy of life; I do hope we all have this.

The celibate life is often looked upon as a very lonely life. I believe it is solitude, not loneliness, that should be its characteristic. Anne Morrow Lindberg, in her book *Gift from the Sea*, talks about solitude. Her whole book is a guide for women to learn this art. She believes it is absolutely necessary for any woman to be alone



some time each day, each week, each year. The openness that is descriptive of the *anawim* is thereby engendered. Patience and faith is what the sea teaches. "One should lie empty, open, choiceless as a beach—waiting for a gift from the sea." (A modern description of the *Anawim*?) Mrs. Lindberg opens her book with this statement, and then proceeds: from her solitude she felt a oneness and joy with God's creation of earth and sea and air. She could better appreciate the beauties of nature and enjoy an even greater closeness to her fellow man. In her solitude she strips herself of material possessions—one does not need much, alone in a cottage on a beach. Here she finds herself—important because "when one is a stranger to oneself then one is estranged from others too."

Woman is the eternal nourisher of children, of men, of society: this demands that she give—not purposelessly, however. Purposeful giving is not apt to deplete one's resources. The more one gives, the more one has to give. But even purposeful giving must have a source to refill it. Solitude—pondering. Women must find that inner stillness which Charles Morgan describes as "the stilling of the soul within the activities of the mind and body so that it might be still as the axis of a revolving wheel is still." What an appropriate image of Mary and an ideal for the religious of today: to be the still axis within the revolving wheel of relationships, obligations, and activities. To be able to do this amid the myriad duties of today which tend toward fragmentation, religious women need to conquer the art of solitude which should be an outgrowth of their consecrated celibacy.

Negatively, celibacy has reference to abstention and detachment from a most beautiful area of human love. A keen and profound appreciation of this God-given human reality allows a person who knowingly and freely accepts celibacy to offer to God and the Church a great sacrifice and gift, one which is tremendously pleasing to God since it symbolizes life and love in itself. In celibate consecration, a relationship is established with Christ and His people that is unique and exclusive, a relationship flowing from a special calling from God. In service and complete dedication one can be for others as Christ was and is. The life of Mary as we have thought of it this evening is a prime example of this celibate love. Such love and its expression is a truly significant dimension in the life of the Church and thus must be fostered and protected with great care and reverence.

How do we as contemporary religious women and followers of Mary experience celibate love today? By total commitment to the person of Christ and the needs of his people. Such an experience will demand a knowledge and sensitivity to the values involved in such a dedication. It will demand a generosity and spirit of sacrifice of no small account. It will demand God's help and the support of community. It will demand our saying, with Mary, "Fiat."

Vatican II in its Decree on Religious life has placed celibacy as the constitutive element in Religious life. Virginity is a gift in the theological order. It implies action on the part of God as well as on the part of man. It is the acceptance, definitive and

enduring on God's part of the gift of self which He has inspired in man. St. Paul tells us that a Christian virgin constitutes an essential sign of that life to come. She is concerned with the things of the Lord (cf. I Cor. 7, 34). She is a prophetic reality. She is also a sign of the present good. St. Matthew reveals virginity as a state of witness to the reality of Redemption (cf. Math. 19, 21); St. Luke, as the ideal condition of the pilgrim disciple of Christ (cf. Lk. 20, 34s), a consecrated state daily renewed.

In summary, perhaps we can say, Virginity or Consecrated Celibacy is a charismatic gift establishing one through faith, hope and love in the state of witness to the redemption. And is this not the mystery of Mary?

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