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## Mary, Model of Modern Woman

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## MARY, MODEL OF MODERN WOMAN

Paul Claudel has a very meaningful prayer of thanksgiving that he directed to Mary. I would like to begin my discussion with you this morning by repeating those words:

Because you are there forever,  
Simply because you are Mary,  
Simply because you exist,  
Mother of Jesus Christ,  
Be Thanked.<sup>1</sup>

Yes, because you exist we are thankful, Mary. We need what you are and what you did. But why? Why do we find it necessary to stress that right now? To put it simply, it is because we are living in an age that is anything but simple. We are living in an age of complexity, of spiritual complexity. It is a time when the traditional order of things has been challenged. As you already know, a large part of this has been brought about by scientific and technological advances that appear to outrun our ability to comprehend them. Vatican II had the tremendous task of trying to grapple with these problems produced by this amazing technological age. All questions, even those that appeared to be most pressing, could not be handled and indeed were not handled by the Council. Even the place of Mary was the subject of serious debate at the Council. The Fathers finally decided to place the chapter on Mary in the document on the Church, *Lumen Gentium*, obviously in order to integrate her more fully with the Church. But here also, the Council did not solve many of the questions concerning Mary; her death, her physical virginity, or her awareness of the divinity of Christ at the time of the Annunciation.<sup>2</sup>

Although much has been written about Mary over the cen-

<sup>1</sup> Paul Claudel, *La Vierge à midi*.

<sup>2</sup> Cf. René Laurentin, *La Vierge au Concile* (Paris, 1968) 21

turies, we never seem to grow tired of hearing and writing about that one priceless human being who was privileged to be the Mother of the Son of God. In recent times, however, the emphasis on Mary has been diminished, costing us a vital source of inspiration and help. But we should never forget that Mary has a continuing function in the world of her Son as it strives to restore all things in her Son.

Mary would naturally be the model for the modern Christian woman in that she was a woman, a mother, and lest we forget, she was a human being. In our discussion let us consider the mature woman that Mary exemplified and the life of faith that she lived; the faith that is always present in the mature woman.

The nursery rhyme tells us that little girls who become women are made of sugar and spice and everything nice. This hardly seems a fit description of Mary or the mature woman. I would hope that a woman had more substance than that. A woman, as the term is used by Evoy and O'Keefe in *The Man and the Woman*, is genuine; she is mature, warm, understanding, selfless, and very honest.<sup>3</sup> As Edith Stein has observed, woman is, by her essence, made for the other.<sup>4</sup> Her nature is one of giving and of loving. And she is, if she is to be truly woman, absolutely feminine. We can agree with Chesterton that the most important thing for a country is that the men be manly and the women womanly. The irony of trying forcibly to change this arrangement was illustrated by him when he said, "Twenty million women rose to their feet with the cry, 'We will not be dictated to,' and proceeded to become stenographers."

Encountered today is the woman who finds it difficult to accept her womanly role. This appears to be based on an over-evaluation of masculine achievements and a rejection, perhaps

<sup>3</sup> John J. Evoy, S.J. and Sr. Maureen O'Keefe, S.S.N.D., *The Man and the Woman* (New York, 1968) 43.

<sup>4</sup> André Devaux, *Teilhard and Womanhood* (Glen Rock, N.J., 1968) 43.

unconsciously, of motherhood. It is an imitating of man, associated with an undertone of envy and resentment. Woman's flight from the role that is hers according to the order of nature is an unmeasurable loss to mankind. Nature specifies purpose, and it is woman's nature to mother, to provide and preserve humanity, to surrender herself in love, to love. To Teilhard, woman is seen to be the mainspring of human progress. Woman shows us that "what we need is not a *tête-à-tête* discussion, nor a hand-to-hand fight, but a heart-to-heart union in love."<sup>5</sup>

Margaret Mead has touched on this topic when she wrote so beautifully the following:

Through the ages, human beings have remained human because there were women whose duty it was to provide continuity to their lives, to be there when they went to sleep and when they woke up, to ease pain, to sympathize with failure and rejoice at success, to listen to tales of broken hearts, to soothe and support and sustain and stimulate husbands and sons as they faced the vicissitudes of a hard outside world . . . the young, the sick, the old, the unhappy and the triumphantly victorious have needed special individuals to share with them and care for them.<sup>6</sup>

Woman by her nature wants to give, but she wants her giving to be purposeful. It must be so if she is to be replenished and have a source from which to give. Edith Stein tells us about this source which can be, of course, none other than Divine Love.

to let one's own life end that there may be room for the divine life. This is the motive, the beginning and the end . . . It is love bending down to the one in need, healing that which is sick, awakening that which is dead, protecting, nursing, teaching, shaping, mourning with the mourners, rejoicing with the joyful, serving every creature that it may come to the end God made it for. . .<sup>7</sup>

<sup>5</sup> *Op cit*, 45

<sup>6</sup> Margaret Mead, in *Review for Religious* (March, 1958)

<sup>7</sup> *Ibid*

Edith Stein has captured just about every recorded event in the life of Mary. Mary, who was very much of a woman, had at the base of all her actions her love of God. A young Jewish maiden filled with the love of God from the moment of her conception by her possession of sanctifying grace radiated that love of God in all of her actions. Did she not abandon herself in self-forgetting love at the time of the Annunciation? She who had conceived Christ first in her heart was now privileged to conceive Him in her womb. She could anticipate the words of St. Paul and say in the literal sense, "It is now no longer I who live, but Christ lives in me."

This overflowing love for God manifested itself in her concern for other people. A true woman never causes embarrassment, and she protects others from embarrassment. She always helps the other to become more mature, more confident, more human. She protects the other as much as she can so as to cushion any unnecessary hurt. Mary at Cana gives such an example of the mature woman, considerate, selfless, protecting. The embarrassment of lack of hospitality as it would be manifested in a lack of beverage was noted by Mary and through her suggestion corrected. This example of considerateness on the part of Mary is one of the intangibles that the modern woman can imitate. To be as aware of others as one is of oneself is the sign of the mature woman. Women seem to have this ability almost instinctively. Their nature has equipped them to be sensitive to the needs of others. Failure to develop or act upon this would be a most serious omission.

Was not Mary present at Calvary as a source of strength not only to the followers of Jesus but perhaps to Jesus Himself? Jesus was Man and God. He grew. He matured. He advanced in age and wisdom. He was no less man when He hung from the cross than He was as an infant in Mary's arms, and every man and every woman needs the love and concern of another man or woman. Certainly Mary could have been excused from witnessing the execution. It was no place for a woman. The cruelty, the abusiveness, the foul language. How these must

have hurt her sensibilities as a woman, not to even consider the wounds they must have inflicted on her as a mother. And yet, the gospels paint a picture of her strength, of her presence, of her giving of herself up to the moment of the death of her Son, and then beyond that, to His followers after His resurrection. She who should have been consoled by others was herself the one consoling. It belongs to women to show that love always has the strength to go on. And this Mary has admirably demonstrated. If woman could but realize the strength she can give through the illuminating and idealizing power which she exercises simply by her presence, and through the calm of her repose! To know that someone cares, that someone would lift the burden if that were possible, is the greatest healing medicine human beings have at their disposal.

One of woman's highest activities is that of response. She is mirror to light, echo to voice. And this we see so fruitfully worked out in the life of Mary. From her first *fiat* at the moment of the Annunciation to her last *fiat* at the foot of the cross, Mary was the mirror of the light of Christ. Her life was one of growth, one of love, one of faith. As Mary grew in her ability to love, so too did she grow in the capacity of being hurt. And yet, as a mature woman, she never shut the gates of love because of a fear of the hurt that would one day be hers. This ability to love, to open up to another person, this ability not to avoid the hurt of love that can come in a person-to-person relationship was one of the greatest examples that Mary gave to the modern woman who frequently has difficulties with interpersonal relationships.

The mature woman is further characterized by her deep abiding faith in God. She has about her a certain calm, a complete trust in God. She radiates peace to all who come in contact with her. Every individual is a better person for having known her. Mary was this kind of a woman, and we see this in her faith. Perhaps more than any other virtue, faith was the most outstanding aspect of the life of Mary.

In the past it has been too easy to ignore certain scriptural

passages and over-emphasize Mary's relationship with Christ according to the flesh and not bring out in full light her relationship to Him in the order of faith. But as René Laurentin tells us in *La Vierge au Concile*, biblical renewal has led more and more theologians to take all scriptural passages into consideration and to integrate them in the Catholic doctrine on Mary. As should have been expected, we have gained deeper insights flowing from such an integration. And so we find in the document *Lumen Gentium* (No. 57) the words, "they did not understand the reply of the Son" after finding Him in the temple.<sup>8</sup> Mary did not understand, and yet her faith stood firm.

Again, in St. Mark's gospel, Chapter III, it is reported that a crowd was outside the house in which Jesus was teaching. The report came in that His mother and brethren were outside seeking him. Christ's answer confused many for a long time because it appeared to be an insult given to Mary. Therefore the scriptural passage was put aside in the treatment of Mary. Jesus answered, "Who is my mother . . . ?" And looking around at those present, and indicating with an all-embracing gesture, He followed this rhetorical question with the comment, "Behold my mother . . . for whoever does the will of God, he is . . . my mother."<sup>9</sup> What has happened here is that Christ has proclaimed that there is a kingdom beyond the bond of flesh and blood.<sup>10</sup> Is not this what Christ meant when He rejected the carnal praise of the woman who exclaimed "Blessed the womb that bore you" by proclaiming in return the higher state, "Blessed those who hear the word of God and keep it!"<sup>11</sup>

These words do not insult the Blessed Virgin Mary but invite us to consider her true authentic greatness in all of its exemplarity. Mary kept the word of God through faith. She conceived Christ in her faith first, and then kept the Word in her womb.

<sup>8</sup> Cf. Laurentin, *op. cit.*, 32.

<sup>9</sup> Mk. 3:35.

<sup>10</sup> *Lumen gentium*, No. 58.

<sup>11</sup> Lk. 11:27-28.

This acceptance of all that scriptures have to say concerning Mary is not without fruit. It brings to the fore a doctrine too long forgotten: that great theme proclaimed by the Fathers that Mary did conceive Christ in faith first and then in her womb. In *Lumen Gentium* (No. 53) this idea is brought forth. It is not a new idea, for St. Augustine had already expressed it in the fourth century.<sup>12</sup>

The Christian faith is more than an empty, uncommitted acknowledgement of the truth of the Word of God. Involving both the grace of God and the decision of man, it provides a completely new center for the believer's entire existence. Henceforth, it will be responsive to the voice of God as Mary was perfectly responsive to the voice of God. The act of conceiving Christ in our hearts we can and, of course, should imitate. We are part of that Divine Plan that calls for the restoration of all things in Christ. How else should we begin if not with ourselves and restore Him within our own hearts? This is the higher conception and it is open to each one of us.

René Laurentin has stated quite correctly that Mary is no longer a 'material model' for the modern woman because social circumstances have changed so greatly between far-off Nazareth and our time. But Mary remains a universal model on the level of her deep commitment in faith to God's will.<sup>13</sup> We tend to forget that fact. All of Mary's earthly life was lived under the veil of faith. She did not comprehend the events of which she was a part, and yet she believed with a faith that increased through meditation and through living in close contact with her Son.<sup>14</sup>

Mature faith demands the reflection on the Christian message of the scriptures. Mary again is our model as she dwelt on the words of God. After failing to understand the words of her

<sup>12</sup> St. Augustine in *PL* 40, 240

<sup>13</sup> Eamon R. Carroll, O.Carm., *What Happened To Our Devotion To Mary?* Address to Lay Carmelites, Denver, Colo., Aug. 10, 1968 (Ms.)

<sup>14</sup> Edward Schillebeeckx, O.P., *Mary, Mother of the Redemption* (New York, 1964) 6



Son at the incident in the temple when He said that "He had to be about His Father's business,"<sup>15</sup> she is reported to have kept all these things in her heart. Faith for us, as for Mary, demands a serious meditation on those truths that will bring about a more intense participation in the indispensable dialogue between God and ourselves. It also requires that we consider in the light of faith the daily experiences of our own life and the problems besetting the world. Mary experienced the same difficulties in her life as we do in ours but she always submitted in faith.<sup>16</sup> It is necessary for us to see all things in the light of faith. As one of our retreat masters often said to us, it is necessary to pick up the morning paper to see what God has been doing.

Faith in God involves more than that which is pleasant. It involves more than abstract principles. Faith is a living thing. It is action. Mary was told to take the Child and flee into Egypt. Why? It was reported to be the middle of the night. And yet, because she believed in the word that was spoken to her, she pulled up roots and fled into an unknown land to face unknown hardships.

What is the parallel of this to women in the twentieth century? Perhaps because it is so obvious we tend to overlook it. How many times does the voice of the Church speak and although we do not agree or understand, we have to obey? How many times is faith tempted when we read about or are caught up in natural disasters? How many mothers and wives receive from the military a notice ringed in black, "We regret to inform you . . ." Disease strikes even the most promising. Accidents claim the talented. Why, God! Why must I, who have always tried to obey your commands, who have disciplined myself, who have given of myself to your people, why must I be afflicted with this sorrow that is more than I can bear? We forget that Mary's Son was crucified before her eyes. Can you possibly imagine the incongruity of it all to Mary—the Creator "de-

<sup>15</sup> *Lk* 2:49

<sup>16</sup> Schillebeeckx, *op. cit.*, 4

stroyed" by His creation? How easy it is to succumb to the almost overpowering temptation and forget that this is part of life. This is the result of man's free choice. This happened because man has not as yet conquered all of creation . . . This is all part of God's plan as creation slowly evolves toward a state of perfection and the restoration of all things in Christ. Certainly this rates as one of the most difficult of times. And the more difficult, the more Mary is needed as model. To know that her Son was the Creator of all that existed and yet to see Him physically punished by His own creation must have tested Mary's faith to the full. And yet she continued to believe. She continued to be present. She continued to give of herself to those who were left. She continued to live for God. She never questioned but remained steadfast in the belief that if she did what she could, God would somehow or other see this event through. This message of steadfastness, of faith, of simplicity to the desires of God is needed by the modern Christian woman in her daily struggles amidst the complexities of present-day living where all types of anxieties are such obstacles to mental and spiritual integrity, to peace and union with God. In God's personal call to each one of us in our own particular walk of life, faith in God is always the important note. Only our lack of faith limits the power of God in us.

Andrew Greeley remarks that Mary was a woman of not only staggering faith, but of tremendous courage; as such, she would have had a great deal to say about interracial justice or the plight of migrant workers or the suffering people of the underdeveloped countries.<sup>17</sup> Mary was involved in her own society to the extent of the custom of the times. We cannot compare the two societies. Since it would appear that Mary spent most of her time at home and did not appear on television or on the speaking platform, this does not excuse us from not using the methods at hand. Her life was influenced by the sec-

<sup>17</sup> Cf. Andrew Greeley, *Teenage World, Its Crises and Anxieties* (Tehny, Ill.) 47.

ular events arising from the contemporary political and religious situation in which the Jewish people found themselves.<sup>18</sup>

St. Luke, the evangelist of Mary, shows us a living, vital woman, a woman full of initiative.<sup>19</sup> He writes that Mary spoke with the angel at the Annunciation. The question of whether or not an angel actually appeared to Mary does not destroy the picture Luke paints. Here is a woman not passively accepting but actively accepting the honor of becoming the mother of the Son of God. Luke tells us that Mary speaks with the shepherds. And why not? Mary, the mother, opened herself to the shepherds that they might come closer to Jesus. The modern woman, by perfecting herself and the talents she has, can open the way for many to come closer to Jesus. Later on, Luke writes that Mary speaks to Simeon, he who tells her that she will know great sorrow. Mary was not withdrawn but was rather very much alive and active in the life that was hers. The incident in the Temple strongly suggests that Mary understood her duties and obligations, that she faced her responsibilities conscientiously.

One way to Christ is through Mary. But it must be a real person who is our model. In the past our concept of Mary has not always been meaningful. Frequently she has been looked upon as a sweet but spiritless, faint-hearted lady, and not as a woman who was actually alive, strong, vital, and active. Mary was so often put on the shelf out of reach. She was taken down on occasion and dusted off, even joined in a procession, but then very quickly she was restored to her glass case so that nothing would happen to her. This is definitely not the image that will be accepted today. We must see Mary as she was, an active individual who understood the difficulties of the life she was leading. It is this same woman who now understands the world we are facing. It was not a weak person who faced the uncertainties of life during the public years of Christ. It was

<sup>18</sup> Schillebeeckx, *op. cit.*, 4

<sup>19</sup> Cf. Bonaventure Rinaldi, C.P., *Mary, Mirror of the Divine Tenderness*, in *The Bible Today* (April, 1968) 2521.

not a weak woman who stood as a tower of strength to the men who were called to be His first followers during those trying days between Calvary and Pentecost. It was Mary who was in their midst giving of herself, waiting for the Paraclete to come and strengthen and guide them

We see Mary in the time of trial and difficulty, during times of uncertainty, and always we see the mature woman, accepting, giving of her life, serving as a stabilizing, calming influence on those around her. This is the aspect of Mary that the modern woman can imitate now in this time of uncertainty and turmoil

Mary had Christ for thirty years and then it all changed. How disturbing this must have been. We have had an unquestioning attitude in our Church for hundreds of years and now so much is being questioned. How upsetting this can be. But Mary had the patience to see God's plan unfold. Can we not also have some of this patience as God's spirit begins to unfold in a most exciting way in the Church today? We must see the spirit of God in everything that happens.

Mary brought Christ into the world in a physical way and obeyed the society in which she lived. Mary and Jesus used the times, they did not misuse or thwart the times. And so, too, women who have freer movement in the world today have an obligation to bring Christ to the people of the world in their own way. He must be conceived in the individual woman first in faith and then the woman will be prepared, will be fortified, to bring Him to the rest of the world. The Church needs the thinking of women. Women have so much to give, and now that the opportunities have been granted to them to participate in the Church, women should take advantage of the opportunities.

Mary had the courage to face the life situations as they presented themselves. And they were no easier or less real to her than the crisis situations that face the modern woman of today. And yet because of what she was, a mature woman, Mary was

able to face the vicissitudes of life as she carried out the work she received from Almighty God. It is, then, from her that we learn that woman fulfills her purposes not so much by what she does as by what she is. It is Mary who teaches every Christian woman her essential mission, to be for mankind a living example of the spirit of total dedication to God performing the task of the day for the love of God. To love God with her totality and to radiate that love to the world, this is the universal task of woman.

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