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MARY AND THE CRISIS OF FAITH

Through your faith, God's power will guard you until the salvation which has been prepared is revealed at the end of time. This is a cause of great joy for you, even though you may for a short time have to bear being plagued by all sorts of trials, so that, when Jesus Christ is revealed, your faith will have been tested and proved like gold—only it is more precious than gold, which is corruptible even though it bears testing by fire—and then you will have praise and glory and honour. You did not see him, yet you love him, and still without seeing him, you are already filled with a joy so glorious that it cannot be described, because you believe, and you are sure of the end to which your faith looks forward, that is, the salvation of your souls.¹

For those who are in turmoil and consternation about the relationships among the People of God, who are anxious and disquieted over the misunderstandings and expressed controversies among believers, perhaps these words of St. Peter may be a source of encouragement and understanding. Without seeking to minimize the state of contention we may try to achieve some understanding and a clearer view of the situation.

Briefly, we shall describe certain difficulties present among believers. Then we shall examine the notion of faith in the Bible, and the account of Mary's faith described in the Revealed Word. Finally, through theological reflections we shall confront the present unrest among the People of God and Mary's faith to the difficulties.

But we must be clear about what we are seeking to achieve. If we propose to consider difficulties disturbing believers, we do not mean to imply that we shall consider every difficulty or even every kind. We have chosen some we consider of significance among the People of God.

¹ I *Pet.*, 1:5-9

Further, in confronting such unrest with the faith of Mary we are not suggesting a panacea. Mary's faith is relevant, but as an example for the believer.

I. UNREST AMONG BELIEVERS

A. *The witness in a pluralistic secular society*

Can there be Christian living isolated from the environmental, cultural, political impacts and influences of the secular society of which we are a part? Taking cognizance of the society, Vatican II aptly notes: *The will to play one's role in common endeavors should be everywhere encouraged*.² One cannot ignore this world. Yet in the presence of computer-like results institutional religion appears hopelessly out-of-place and outclassed. Atheism is on the scene as more than a fad.³ How do you communicate with a secular world? How do you respond to pluralism that identifies the world? What kind of witness can the Christian offer when the very need for a Christian witness is disputed or ignored? What response can the Christian make to the atheist when he has been taught that atheism is simply an intellectual persuasion, not a practical way of life?

B. *Christian Identity*

The difficulty for the believer may assume the proportions of the identity of Christianity itself.⁴ What precisely is a Christian? In the midst of one's struggles against various forms of social injustice, how does one recognize what is Christian when professed Christians are on both sides of the issues? As one

² Vatican II, *Pastoral Constitution on the Church in the Modern World* *The Documents of Vatican II*, ed. W. M. Abbott (New York, 1966), 229, n. 31; 224, n. 25. See K. Rahner, *Nature and Grace* (New York, 1963) 3-80. The first two essays are relevant to the discussion here, the third essay will suggest further aspects to be explored. *Idem*, *The Christian Commitment*, tr. C. Hastings (New York, 1963) 3-37, 75-135.

³ Vatican II, *op. cit.*, 216 ff.

⁴ Vatican II, *op. cit.*, 201, 225, 227; 262-263, 264-271.

looks up the line of Christians—individuals, Christian groups, the institutional Church itself—he may be looking in vain for a ready, concrete identity of the Christian commitment.⁵ The ineffectiveness or absence of the Church from man's daily, concrete activities stands before the believer as the absence of God Himself. Now the Christian confronts a pitiless, swift-moving world and a Church of unpredictable efficiency. So, if the institutional Church fails in its protest to effect changes in her own adherents it may be best to separate oneself from the superficial security offered in the Church. So the plea rises to restore all things in the Gospel, to seek security in Christ alone. This attitude not only devalues the institutional Church but questions her continued existence.⁶

C. *The Eschatological Situation*

*For man is not restricted to the temporal sphere. While living in history he fully maintains his eternal vocation.*⁷ Even as salvation history unfolds for each Christian there is this other historical experience, the Church's efforts appear unavailing to the point of embarrassing silence; professed followers of Christ mouth His teachings while behaving in most unChristlike manner; in the midst of an active, apparently self-sufficient world, it is the absence of God that is accented, not His presence. So, old standards are abandoned.⁸ Prudence, caution, patience are relegated among the relics. For the "now" generation not only actions but results must be at hand at once.

In the instances cited there is revealed doubt, confusion; there is revealed anxiety about one's relationship to God. A ready and glib explanation offered for the situation is the difference between a conservative-traditionalist viewpoint and a liberal-progressive viewpoint. Again, we hear the name of Pope John XXIII, or Vatican II as good prospects to bear the

⁵ Vatican II, *op. cit.*, 262 ff

⁶ Vatican II, *op. cit.*, 208

⁷ Vatican II, *op. cit.*, 288

⁸ Vatican II, *op. cit.*, 205, n. 7; 203-207, *passim*.

responsibility for the situation because of the changes they initiated. Yet, the opinions voiced are either that change has been too rapid, or that it has been too slow. Further, the opinions and complaints issue from both conservatives and liberals. But what are we dealing with here? We are dealing with Christians concerned about their calling and their response to the word of God. We are considering, then, crisis in the faith of the People of God.

II BIBLICAL NOTION OF FAITH

Faith is a gift of God,⁹ *the free gift that he (man) does not deserve, of being made righteous.*¹⁰ Through His grace God calls to man interiorly; exteriorly He calls to man through His message.¹¹ So it is by faith that we accept God's revelation, that we submit to the way of salvation determined by God and made accessible in Christ.¹² Faith means to accept and receive this divine presence as an abiding reality into our personal existence. To this ineffable gift, to this manifestation of God in grace man's personal response is that of acceptance and submission.

But for such a total response to the inner call God provides preaching, for as St. Paul notes, faith comes through hearing: *But they will not ask his help unless they believe in him, and they will not believe in him unless they have heard of him, and they will not hear of him unless they get a preacher, . . .*¹³ This relationship of the preaching to the inner call we may appreciate from this that the Christian receives the preaching not as man's word but as the word of God which comes with

⁹ Eph 2:8.

¹⁰ Rm 5:17.

¹¹ Juan Alfaro, *The Dual Aspect of Faith: Entrusting Oneself to God and Acceptance of the Christian Message*, in *Concilium* 21 (New York, 1967) 59, 61.

¹² R. Bultmann and A. Weiser, *Faith, Bible Key Words*, 3; ed. G. Kittel (New York, 1961) 87. J. Alfaro, *op. cit.*, 53-54, and on p. 55 the scriptural references.

¹³ Rm 10:14-15.

authenticity and authority.¹⁴ Now, while it is true that God is the guarantee of the revelation, still the man who hears must want to understand, for faith remains a free act. Such freedom is evident since that inner obedience of faith cannot be forced.¹⁵

The believer, through his free cooperation with God's grace, receives the apostolic preaching. But what does he believe? St Paul teaches. *Brothers, I want to remind you of the gospel I preached to you, . . . I taught you what I had been taught myself, namely that Christ died for our sins, in accordance with the scriptures, that he was buried, and that he was raised to life on the third day,*¹⁶ So, one must believe the redemption of Christ *that God reconciled the world to himself through Christ.*¹⁷ One must believe the Son¹⁸ and the proclamation¹⁹ of the Gospel.²⁰ In faith we belong to Christ and to the grace²¹ made available to Him and announced in the Gospel.²² It must be emphasized, faith is related to the Gospel, the Good News. But the Good News must be announced, and it must be announced in terms to express the reality which is being revealed to us. So, faith means to hear, to understand, to accept God's message of redemption in Christ.²³ In faith one possesses the knowledge of salvation communicated by the preaching²⁴ and, moreover, a new knowledge of self now as a believer.²⁵ Knowing self as a believer through God's saving act, there is also trust.²⁶

¹⁴ I Thess. 1 3-10, I Cor. 5 2, Eph. 1 13

¹⁵ Rm. 1 5 16, 26; II Cor. 10 5-6

¹⁶ I Cor. 15 1-5, Rm. 1 3-7, 16, 17

¹⁷ II Cor. 5 19, Gal. 4 4-5

¹⁸ Mt. 9 19, Jn. 3 11

¹⁹ Rm. 10 8-17, I Cor. 1 21, 15 11, 14

²⁰ Rm. 1 16; I Cor. 15 1-2, Ph. 1 27, Eph. 1 13

²¹ Jn. 7 38, Gal. 3 2, 5:14

²² I Cor. 15 1, Rm. 5 2, II Cor. 13 5, Gal. 2 16, 22, Eph. 3 17

²³ Rm. 10 8-17, 1 3-7, I Cor. 1 17-21

²⁴ Rm. 6 8 ff., II Cor. 4 13 ff., I Cor. c 15

²⁵ Rm. 5 1-3; 14 14, II Cor. 1 7; 5 6, Ph. 1 19, cf. R. Bultmann & A. Weiser, *op. cit.*, 88

²⁶ Eph. 3 12-13, 6 19

The Christian will have trust and confidence, for faith has its foundation not on the clever and measured insights of men²⁷ but on the power of God.²⁸ Faith rests its confidence upon God's power even to expecting what is humanly impossible.²⁹ If the manifested power of God achieves such results to elicit confident acceptance it also brings forth obedient submission.³⁰ The believer's conviction that it is God revealing moves his will to obey. Thus, faith is to trust and to obey God.³¹

But though faith rests on God's power, it is not free of suffering.³² It is the person's response to God made not in isolation or in ideal conditions and times but in the midst of the world and other men. Man makes his response in faith in the midst of conflicting commitments. Further, the believer responds to the divine presence as one *seeing a dim reflection in a mirror*.³³ The knowledge is imperfect. Yet, faith, even in the face of such trials and uncertainties, must be constant.³⁴

Still, while remaining firm in the individual, faith does not remain static.³⁵ Faith grows, the understanding becomes clearer.³⁶ Through both the interior power of divine grace and the external announcing of His word God reveals Himself

²⁷ II Pet. 1:16

²⁸ I Cor. 2:1-5, Rm 3:27, Eph. 2:9

²⁹ Mt. 21:21-22, Rm 4:18-25, Heb. 11:8-13 ff., Jn. 2:1-11

³⁰ Rm. 15:18-19, 16:26; II Cor. 10:5-6, II Thess. 1:8, Heb. 5:9

³¹ Rm. 1:5, 6:17, 16:26, Acts 6:7

³² "Stand up to him, strong in faith and in the knowledge that your brothers all over the world are suffering the same things. You will have to suffer only for a little while." I Pet. 5:9-10, and *passim*, Rm. 5:1-11 I Cor. 1:17-31; I Thess 3:2-8, II Thess 1:4, Heb. 12:2; Jn 15:18-25

³³ I Cor. 13:12

³⁴ I Cor. 16:13, Col 1:27-29, 2:5, 7. See B. Reicke's commentary, *The Epistles of James, Peter, and Jude*, in *The Anchor Bible* (New York, 1964) 20-25

³⁵ "May you have more and more grace and peace as you come to know our Lord more and more." I Pet. 1:2, Jn. 14:8-9, 29, 16:13; II Cor. c 10, I Cor. c 3; 13:9-12; Rm 14:1, Eph 1:9-23, 3:1-13; I Thess 3:10; II Thess 1:3, Ph 3:9-13

³⁶ J. Alfaro, *op cit* 60-61

in greater concreteness and clarity to the believer.³⁷ Further, in faith one must accept what is divine in a practical way. In the concrete order God demands in definite situations, about definite details a real submission to the divine word, notwithstanding any human experience or appearance. God treats each as a concrete person, so the critical difficulties will vary as the person God approaches.

If there is any hesitation about the total submission in faith there is still the Gospel's reminder: *whoever refuses to believe is condemned already, because he refused to believe in the name of God's only Son.*³⁸ Harshness is not the last word, however. For note what is granted in the total surrender: *life everlasting.*³⁹ Note what is involved in that surrender—total experience: *If you know me, you know my father too. To have seen me is to have seen the Father, . . . I am in the Father and the Father is in me.*⁴⁰ And this seeing is to contemplate what God sets out to announce: *and this is God's testimony given as evidence for his Son. Everybody who believes in the Son of God has this testimony inside him, . . .*⁴¹ Thus, faith is not just acceptance of doctrine but of the reality announced in the doctrine—God Himself in Christ.

So faith is obedience to God's will, absolute confidence in God that in His power He will complete work in us which He began in Christ. In faith it is a question of the contact of a person with God. And it is not an ephemeral, misty sort of meeting. It is not a piece-meal presence of God, for God reveals Himself in His divinity in Christ. Thus, God makes possible this personal contact to us in Christ.

III. THE GOSPELS' ACCOUNT OF MARY'S FAITH

Far from any idealized description, the Gospels present

³⁷ *Jn* 16:29-33

³⁸ *Jn* 3:18

³⁹ *Jn* 6:47; 17:3

⁴⁰ *Jn* 14:7, 9, 10, 20, *Jt*, 1:17

⁴¹ *I Jn* 5:9-10

Mary in her faith in action: her lack of comprehension at the Annunciation⁴²; her wonder at the words of Simeon⁴³; her lack of understanding at the words of Jesus after she found Him in the temple⁴⁴; the exchange at Cana⁴⁵; those two occasions when Jesus identifies family ties⁴⁶; finally, Calvary, the scene of her Son's death⁴⁷

At the Annunciation it is as a believer that Mary receives the word from God: *Rejoice, so highly favoured! The Lord is with you. . . . Mary, do not be afraid; you have won God's favour. Listen! You are to conceive and bear a son . . . He will be great and will be called Son of the Most High. . . . he will rule over the House of Jacob for ever and his reign will have no end.*⁴⁸ What she is hearing is that the centuries of waiting are to come to an end. The long-awaited Messiah is to come now. Her previous acceptance of the divine promise and her submission to that divine order as a devout Jew prepared her for the Messiah's coming, but not precisely in this way. Her disturbance accents her faith. She accepted and submitted to God's will, but the manifestation of that will was not obvious nor easily understandable. She wondered about the greeting as she did about how all this would happen

Mary understood she was being asked to be the mother of the Messiah, and, also, that it was to be accomplished by the power of God. Still, all she had to go on was the word of God, and that she accepted and to that she submitted. Through her faith Our Lady brought the Savior into the world.

That this is an instance of Mary's faith Luke emphasizes

⁴² *Luke* 1 26-38

⁴³ *Luke* 2 33

⁴⁴ *Luke* 2 50

⁴⁵ *Jn.* 2:1-11

⁴⁶ *Luke* 8, 19-21, 11 27-28, *Mt* 12 46-50, *Mk* 3 31-35

⁴⁷ *Jn* 19 25-27

⁴⁸ *Luke* 1.28-33

first, in contrasting it with the doubt of Zachary,⁴⁹ and when he records the praise of Elizabeth: *blessed is she who believed that the promise made her by the Lord would be fulfilled*⁵⁰ The excellence of Our Lady's faith is shown, for Luke notes that the praise of Elizabeth came forth from her when she was *filled with the Holy Spirit*⁵¹ It is God Himself Who is the guarantee of Mary's faith.

But faith is of things not clearly seen or understood, and in Mary's case the Gospels make this evident. Mary was still ignorant of the future, above all, of the manner in which the redemption was to be carried out. When Mary presented Jesus in the temple she stood wondering at the things Simeon said about the child: the salvation of all nations, a light for all pagans, the glory of Israel, destined for the fall and for the rising of many in Israel, a sign that is rejected.⁵² Then Simeon adds: *and a sword will pierce your own soul too.*⁵³ She remained uncomprehending too at Jesus' reply in the temple on a later occasion: *Did you not know I must be busy with my Father's affairs?*⁵⁴ But she pondered these things, for faith must be a free acceptance and submission carried out neither in fear nor in ignorance. God continued to reveal Himself to Mary slowly, and in His own way. She was being led to understand that her motherhood had to do with the things of God for which her response was demanded.

Further, she was to understand that her faith stood her in greater stead before God than even her physical motherhood. Christ identifies His family as *those who hear the word of God and put it into practice*,⁵⁵ and singles out for blessings

⁴⁹ Luke 1:5-22. See A. Feuillet, *La Vierge Marie dans le Nouveau Testament*, Maria, ed. H. du Manoir, 6 (Paris, 1961) 38, J. Galot *Mary in the Gospel*, tr. M. Constance (Westminster, Md., 1965) 48.

⁵⁰ Luke 1:45.

⁵¹ Luke 1:42.

⁵² Luke 2:29-34.

⁵³ Luke 2:35.

⁵⁴ Luke 2:49-50.

⁵⁵ Luke 8:19-21.

those who hear the word of God and keep it.⁵⁶ Mary entered into the redemptive act more profoundly and more intimately as she responded with obedient faith to such continuing revelation. She was being formed into the Christian *par excellence*, into the exemplar for the Christian life of faith.

The confidence of faith rests on the mighty power of God Himself. The confidence of Our Lady's faith surely is involved in the Cana episode.⁵⁷ What else but a confidence flowing from her faith in the divine presence would have led her to expect what could only be an extraordinary work?⁵⁸ And the evangelist indicates there is a radiation of her faith here even horizontally: the disciples believe. Not directly because of her faith, but because of the effect her faith elicited.⁵⁹

For Mary, surely, Calvary⁶⁰ stands as a significant sign of the demands of faith. When one spends a lifetime meeting agonizing situations she might be tempted to suppose that suffering had run its course. But Mary now knows this added sorrow of the mother: her son is killed. Now the prophecy of Simeon becomes clearer.⁶¹ It is the symbol of the revealing word of God in Jesus bearing salvation. Christ is indeed the sign of contradiction for those who will fall and for those who will remain standing.⁶² Now, also, the stark realism of what she had given her consent to at the Annunciation more completely enters her understanding. Mary's *fiat* placed her in the redemptive act, it brought her salvation. She freely consented to initiate Christ's entrance upon the work of redemption, as she now assists at His departure upon its completion.

⁵⁶ Luke 11:27-28

⁵⁷ Jn 2 1-11

⁵⁸ A. Feuillet, *op. cit.*, 53; J. Galot, *op. cit.*, 145-148, M. J. Lagrange, *Évangile Selon S. Jean* (Paris, 1928) *in loco*

⁵⁹ J. Galot, *op. cit.*, 155-158

⁶⁰ Jn 19 25-27

⁶¹ Luke 2.29-34

⁶² P. Benoit, *Et toi-même, un glaive te transpercera l'âme* (Luc 2:35), in *The Catholic Biblical Quarterly* 25 (1963) 251-261. See Luke 23 35

Mary is the prototype, the very first example of a truly Christian sacramental life of faith. She was deeply involved and fully implicated in the visible events of Christ's human life in the world. Because of this she rose to accept, in faith, the divine mystery which was made visible and indeed public, in the outward "sacramental sign" of Christ's humanity, and allowed herself to be bathed in the strength which came to her from the grace of his humanity. Her strong faith and trust enabled her to penetrate Christ's human "shroud" and enter a divine world.⁶³

IV. MARY'S FAITH AND CONTEMPORARY UNREST

What relevance does the fact of Mary's faith, as described and recorded by the evangelists, possess for the believer? Mary's faith is a viable expression of man's response to God's abiding presence and thus stands as an example for man's response to God's word.

But a word about how we view Mary's faith in relationship to other believers. Mary stands as the exemplar of faith to other believers. Her faith is an example for faith in others. We do not view Mary's faith as the interior energy in the birth of the Christian. Mary is before believers as the example, the pattern as to *how* they are to respond to God's saving work in Christ. Further, in Mary we behold that response fulfilled.⁶⁴ In Mary we meet faith realized. All the darkness, obscurity, suffering; all the patience, constancy, confidence we find in Mary fulfilled, brought to completion in the possession of the reality.⁶⁵

⁶³ E. Schillebeeckx, *Mary, Mother of the Redemption*, tr. N. D. Smith (New York, 1964) 26.

⁶⁴ Vatican II, *Dogmatic Constitution on the Church*, *loc. cit.*, p. 93, n. 65, p. 95, n. 68.

⁶⁵ It is to be emphasized: it is not Mary's faith, Mary's absolute response to God's call that will *effect* anything to give birth to the individual's faith. Mary's faith is hers. It is not communicable to energize another's response. The uniqueness of person belies any attempt to explain her relationship to the faith of others as a sharing. For the believer Mary's faith is an example of *how* to respond to God's presence, God's call in his own existential situation.

A. Mary's Faith and the Witness in a Secular Society

If the present-day believer is anxious about the secular society in which he lives he may well reflect that Christ had anticipated and noted some such anxieties⁶⁶ Christ warned the road would indeed be a rough one for him who gives earnest witness to the abiding divine presence. Christ indicated this conflict would be precisely because of one's faith.⁶⁷ Mary certainly grasped such a truth from her own experience.

But Mary remained firm in faith. Even as the portents of suffering became realities, the Mother of Jesus remained *obedient* and *constant* in her belief. So, to one who raises the question about how one is to witness his faith in a pluralistic secular society Mary's faith stands as the exemplar.

Her faith shows that to be a serious witness to the abiding divine presence one does not have to withdraw from society. In the midst of a society no matter how alien or harsh one is to stand firm in his acceptance and submission to God's will. It was during the Roman domination that Mary witnessed her faith. To a world ruled by a pagan power Mary's acceptance of the word of God at the Annunciation and her submission to the divine will brought the Savior. The Gospel helps us to appreciate the firmness and constancy of Mary's faith by comparing it with the doubtful attitude of Zachary.⁶⁸

Again, the constancy of Our Lady's faith is an example as to how one may do what the world legitimately claims. One need not ignore the world. She accompanied Joseph for the registration required by civil law.⁶⁹ But she also presented

There is a communal aspect to Mary's faith. We may even speak of the influence of Mary's faith upon the believer. By faith one communicates in the same sort of response to the divine abiding presence. The response is directed not only vertically to the divine call, but also horizontally. This latter is the resonance of the person's reaction to God's interior and exterior call contributing to a truly communal response.

⁶⁶ *Jn* 15:18-27

⁶⁷ *Ibid*

⁶⁸ *Luke* 1:5-22

⁶⁹ *Luke* 2:1-6

her child in the temple,⁷⁰ in obedience to God's word abiding in that society

The effectiveness of Mary's manner of witness is certified in the Gospel. She receives praise for her physical motherhood. But Christ points out that the greatness of His mother rests rather upon her hearing the word of God and keeping it.⁷¹ Mary had earlier predicted that her obedient witness would gain her recognition.⁷² This cry of praise would tend to confirm the prophecy. For what Mary was doing was to carry out her role in the best manner possible. As the lowly handmaid of the Lord she manifested her own faith. This was her way to give witness. Mary's response emphasizes the need to witness one's faith before the world, but it also underlines the important fact that all need not witness in the same way. As the lowly handmaid of the Lord Mary did not witness as a preacher, for example. St. Paul calls attention to the variety of gifts, and yet *all these are the work of one and the same Spirit, who distributes different gifts to different people just as he chooses.*⁷³ God has ordained that Mary's faith, that of a dutiful and loving mother responding to the demand of God's revelation, be preserved in the Apostolic preaching.

As an effective answer to disbelief, Our Lady's faith expresses the confidence in the power of God. Both the Annunciation and Cana pericopes show how great was Mary's confidence. Her faith possessed the confidence to secure not only temporal needs but even to bring the Savior Himself into the world and faith to the disciples.⁷⁴ Our Lady's answer to doubts and disbelief was the confidence that brought her to the fulfillment of her own faith. If Abraham's faith is recognized as justifying him, it is true of Mary in a more eminent way, as her Assumption would indicate.

⁷⁰ Luke 2:22-35.

⁷¹ Luke 11:28.

⁷² Luke 1:48 and 42, 45.

⁷³ I Cor. 12:11. See there cc. 12-14.

⁷⁴ See above notes 28 and 29. J. Galot, *op. cit.*, 158.

From Mary's faith we learn this also: faith is a gift granted to the individual but with a communal resonance. For by faith one communicates in the same sort of response to the divine abiding presence as other believers. It means that no matter how small and insignificant each may be, still his response is another thrust of the divine word among men, it is a further proclamation of God to men. Perhaps men must be continually reminded that it is God's power that brings the conversion. We must realize that our efforts are inserted into a reality far more profound, far greater than the immediate work. It is God's work.⁷⁵

B *Mary's Faith and Christian Identity*

There is this question of Christian identity. There are Christians today baffled by what they meet in their daily lives—contentious Christians, unjust Christians, Christians killing other men. The situation becomes so acute for some that they would disown Christianity, as though some unknown specter were parading under the guise of Christian. Yet, St. John could cry out about the injustice that had come to his attention.⁷⁶ Paul's letters, certainly, encourage and inspire the various assemblies, but they also chastise and correct the disputes, the shortcomings of the believers, they take note of the un-Christlike attitudes.⁷⁷ Mary, too, met with such contradictions in men's response to God's word of salvation. What was her reaction?

What happened was that Mary heard the word of God and kept it. It is Christ who identifies Mary and her right to any greatness.⁷⁸ This is also the answer to the question about Christian identity. For, ultimately the question of Christian identity comes down to living one's faith in the saving word.

⁷⁵ Cf. G. Lefebvre, *La servante du seigneur*, in *La Vie Spirituelle*, Aug (1963) 291-316.

⁷⁶ I Jn 3:15-18, Jn c 2.

⁷⁷ I Cor 1:10-15, 3:1-4; *passim*, Eph cc 4, 5, Gal 3:1-5; Ph c 3.

⁷⁸ Luke 11:27-28.

That is what Mary did so well, and what identifies her as the exemplar Christian

If there is any importance for Mary's place in the Good News it appears to be her portrayal by the evangelists as the faithful witness. For, her faith suggests to the Christian how to bear witness in the midst of all forms of injustice; how to respond to God's living word when the message remains mysterious, difficult to understand. Mary's faith stands as the example for each of us of man's response to God's call, concretizing and personalizing for us the response. what it means to accept and to submit to the divine word in Christ, i.e., what it means to be a Christian in the world

How does one bear witness in the midst of injustice? Sacred Scripture describes injustice as the kind of action opposed to God's word.⁷⁹ Evidently, then, the Christian will be recognized who listens to God's word and responds to it with constancy and trust. This was Mary's reaction.

In the temple Simeon announced the suffering and mistreatment to be inflicted.⁸⁰ But, though faced with this kind of future, Mary remained constant in her faith, trusting in God. This constancy and trust brought her to Calvary where she faced the horror of man's injustice to man. But St Luke again assures us of her constancy and trust, for after the death she joined the prayers with the disciples.⁸¹ Her example underlines the fact that a Christian is a Christian when he hears God's word, and keeps it. Not doing that is injustice in man.

The Christian certainly will meet with things he cannot comprehend. The Gospels reveal that when Mary met such things she pondered them.⁸² She did not doubt them, dismiss them or reject them. Her response in faith leads us to under-

⁷⁹ *Mt.* 5:20, c. 23, *Rm.* 2:17 f; *I Cor.* 6:1-11, and so throughout Sacred Scripture

⁸⁰ *Luke* 2:29-35

⁸¹ *Acts* 1:14

⁸² *Luke* 2:19, 52

stand that faith, while seeking to understand, submits obediently once it recognizes the message as God's word

The example of Mary's faith stands out especially as she personalizes man's response to God. Christian identity is the response of the individual to God's revelation. The *Christian life must be known and lived as real living*,⁸³ for it is the person to whom God reveals Himself, and it is the person who accepts and submits to that revelation. Where there is such personal commitment in faith is it possible to withdraw, to separate oneself from the Christian community? Faith, the personal commitment of the believer to Christ in the acceptance of the Gospel, is the primary foundation in which the Christian experiences community,⁸⁴ Christian identity focuses upon the individual's response. One may not seek refuge or excuse for personal failure in the institutional Church, for *the individual's Christianity can and must be experienced no less, . . . as an intimate vitality pressing outwards from within to inform the rest of life than as a norm confronting us from outside with its demand of "Thou shalt" and its claim on our respect*.⁸⁵ Thus, the importance of Mary's example of faith for us arises from her personal response to the abiding divine presence, of which we become so much aware in her company. That we should become aware of the abiding divine presence in the company of Mary need not surprise, for that is her identity: she who heard the word of God, and keeps it. Mary's faith is the viable example that that personal response to God's will is possible in which we achieve Christian identity.

C. Mary's Faith and the Eschatological Situation

We have already met Vatican II's summation of this difficulty: *For man is not restricted to the temporal sphere. While*

⁸³ K. Rahner, *The Christian Commitment*, 101

⁸⁴ A. George, *La communion des saints dans les épîtres de saint Paul*, in *Lumière et Vie* 16 (1967) 3-20, Eph 4 3-5

⁸⁵ K. Rahner, *op. cit.*, 102

*living in history he fully maintains his eternal vocation.*⁸⁶ We may describe it also as the problem of the existential moment. The Apostolic preaching says: the kingdom of God is at hand;⁸⁷ is now in your midst⁸⁸ But concrete facts would tend to belie or at least seriously challenge that. If God's kingdom is in our midst, why aren't the wicked punished? Why aren't the needs of the poor satisfied? Why aren't the sick and the suffering cured? Why can't we get things done now? And modern society with its technology contributes to such unrest and impatience. Salvation history holds out the promise of great things. But the history of the moment seems to engage our efforts and attention. Mary was acquainted with this tension.

Yet in the midst of the cruelty of men and the apparent silence of God, Mary preserved the confidence of her faith. Further, her understanding of the salvation message became clearer. For the believer troubled by the seeming contradiction of the claims of salvation history and the reality of the moment, Our Lady's faith exemplifies the trust and confidence of the faithful response to God's revelation, and the growth and development that faith undergoes.

We have already seen how the Gospels portray Mary's trust and confidence of faith—at the Annunciation and at Cana. The example of her faith is clear enough: to accomplish our destiny we must trust in God; to achieve results in the world we must have confidence in the divine power. It was that sort of trust and confidence that saw Mary from the Annunciation through Simeon's prophecy, that made her patient through those silent, uneventful years in Nazareth to the public ministry; that helped her to understand the sacrifice on Calvary as the climax to the message of salvation she had received. Trust and confidence are necessary for those experiencing the uncer-

⁸⁶ Vatican II, *Pastoral Constitution on the Church in the Modern World*, *loc. cit.*, 288

⁸⁷ Mark 1 15; Mt. 3 2

⁸⁸ Luke 11 20, Mt. 12 28

tainty and the insecurity of their existential moment. To continue to respond to God's word in the midst of conflicting demands—those of salvation, those of the world—there is an urgency that one rely on God, for one no longer is capable of himself. From Mary's example of faith one ought to recognize the human limitation and its release in the divine power.

Our Lady's faith is an example also of the growth in faith. There was progress in Mary's faith. All may have been included in the angel's announcement, but the Gospels make clear that the understanding of the contents took place gradually: the continuing revelation is described as her pondering the message.

Further, there is the question of the response of Mary as a person. Was there the same sort of personal response to the original message—presuming her knowledge may have been of the suffering servant—as there was with the gradual revelation, e.g., at the Presentation? on Calvary? Evidently, the demands of God's word were concretized with the gradual revelation. Mary as a person simply had to react differently to mere knowledge of the fact and to the accomplishment of the fact. We noted about faith that it deals not only with the doctrinal content of the message but also with the living reality of salvation. Mary's life was spent in intimacy with that living reality, with a deepening response to God's presence in Christ.

Mary's faith helps us to realize the long delay on earth is not all a loss. It is rather an opportunity to grow, to develop in knowledge of the content of the revelation. While salvation has been won for this man now, it is also true that for this man the existential situation is a succession of concrete historical moments in which for him salvation may be either finally realized or in which he may be being merely led to the final realization. In each concrete historical moment there is God's abiding presence. Hence, in each concrete historical moment there is to be man's response to this presence. The

demand for such renewed response may be trying to the believer but it will lead him to understand that the passage to eternal life for Mary was through the agony of the Passion

Conclusion

All this about Mary is revealed to us by way of confronting us with Mary in her acceptance of and response to God's word. The example of Mary's faith, then, is not simply a sign in the window but is presented to us by God for our reflection, for our imitation as being a divinely-designed pattern to guide our response. In the discussion we have brought out certain characteristics of Mary's faith as perhaps relevant to certain contemporary problems in faith. In the final analysis, it is not this or another characteristic of Our Lady's faith that is important; rather it is simply her response to the divine revelation as she accepted the divine word and submitted to it. In Mary we behold faith achieving its fulfillment. The one who receives God's word, accepts it and submits to it will in his personal response bring forth the characteristics that will identify his own various acts of faith. They will indicate to him the totalness of his own commitment; they will reveal the depth and intimacy of his own response, of his reception and possession of the living reality, the living God.

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