

Beholding Our Mother

I. Introduction

- A. When the Archangel Gabriel appeared to Mary at the Annunciation to reveal to her her role in God's plan for the salvation of the world, he told her first to rejoice and then told her not to be afraid. After telling her she was full of grace, the Lord was with her and that she had found favor with God, he described how she would conceive in her womb by the power of the Holy Spirit a son who would be named "God-saves," who would be great, called Son of the Most High God, and who would reign as the Son of David over the house of Jacob forever. These are truly incredible words; for nothing, as the Angel told her, is impossible for God. Her response was to say that she was a handmaid totally at God's service, announcing that she would let her whole life develop according to God's word.
- B. But God's word has already prophesied that the Messiah would be a suffering servant, that he would be despised and rejected, a man of sorrows, betrayed by his close friend, falsely accused, taunted by his enemies, sold for 30 pieces of silver, led like a lamb to the slaughter, giving his back to those who beat him and his cheeks to those who would pull out his beard, that his tongue would stick parched to the roof of his mouth, his hands and feet pierced, his clothes divided for a game of dice, ultimately wounded for our transgressions, crushed for our sins, so that we might be healed by his stripes.
- C. The deeper reality of Mary's fiat, her beatitude through faith — blessed is she who believed that the Lord's words to her would be fulfilled, as her cousin Elizabeth said to her — would become clearer over time.
- D. The first inkling happened at the presentation of Jesus in the temple, when the elderly Simeon, moved by the Holy Spirit, took the baby Jesus in his arms and prophesied. He began with very consoling words, calling Jesus his salvation, a light to the nations and the glory of Israel. But then he turned to Mary and said, "Behold, this child is set for the fall and rise of many in Israel." The words he uses goes far beyond just "ups and downs" or "good days and bad days." The literal translation is the "ruin and resurrection" of many in Israel. He'd be a "sign to be contradicted," one spoken against and cursed. If that wasn't enough to pierce the heart of a mother who loved a Son and wanted the best, what Simeon said next was probably even more jarring: "And a sword will pierce through your own soul as well, so that the thoughts of many hearts may be revealed."
- E. This was, Blessed John Paul II would write in 1987, like a new annunciation.
 1. Simeon's words cast new light on the announcement that Mary had heard from the angel: Jesus is the Savior, he is "a light for revelation" to mankind. ... But at the same time, ... "a sign that is spoken against" (Lk. 2:34). Simeon's words seem like a second Annunciation to Mary, for they tell her of the actual historical situation in which the Son is to accomplish his mission, namely, in misunderstanding and sorrow. While this announcement on the one hand confirms her faith in the accomplishment of the divine promises of salvation, on the other hand it also reveals to her that she will have to live her obedience of faith in suffering, at the side of the suffering Savior, and that her motherhood will be mysterious and sorrowful.
- F. We see how this contradiction itself extended throughout Jesus' life and penetrated her soul like many daggers.
 1. Almost from the first instant, her maternal joy was marred by agony.
 2. Magi bring not only good and incense, but myrrh, a preparation for burial.
 3. She suffers the murder of the holy innocents.
 4. Jesus, Mary and Joseph have to flee to Egypt lest Jesus be murdered even as a baby.
 5. She loses Jesus for 3 days at 12, a contradiction even to her. When she lost him, she knew what emptiness was, but it was a foreshadowing of losing him for three days 21 years later.
 6. Jesus' townspeople try to kill him by throwing him off the cliff.

7. Some of his relatives believe that he's out of his mind.

8. Even archenemies — the Pharisees and the Herodians — begin to conspire together to plot his murder.

II. Standing by her Son to the last

A. All of this reaches its culmination on Good Friday, as Jesus is arrested, tortured, condemned to death, led out carrying the instrument of death, and eventually spiked to a perpendicular sign of contradiction and lifted up like a serpent.

B. St. John tells us that when Jesus was crucified, “standing near the cross of Jesus were his mother, and his mother’s sister, Mary the wife of Clopas, and Mary Magdalene” (Jn 19:25).

C. By this point, she had long seen what the inevitable end would be; she had no delusions, like those of the apostles, concerning the founding of an earthly kingdom. She knew the Scriptures and could not fail to discover the repeated warnings concerning her son. From the time of her secret conversation with the Archangel Gabriel, she began to see in her mission as a mother her ‘destiny’ to share, in a singular and unrepeatable way, in the very mission of her Son to die to take away the sins of the world.

D. She faithfully persevered in union with her Son to the Cross. And it was here, where Mary’s suffering alongside the suffering of her Son reached, as John Paul II wrote in his document on Christian suffering back in 1984, “an intensity that can hardly be imagined from a human point of view but which was mysterious and supernaturally fruitful for the redemption of the world. Her ascent of Calvary and her standing at the foot of the Cross together with the Beloved Disciple were a special sort of sharing in the redeeming death of her Son.” It was here that not only she was a “witness *to* her Son's Passion by her *presence*, and as a sharer in it by her *compassion*,” making up what was lacking in her son’s afflictions for the sake of his body the Church.

E. As she stood at the foot of his cross for hours that must have seemed like millennia, would she have thought back to Gabriel’s words that her Son would be “great ...and the Lord God will give to him the throne of his father David, and he will reign over the house of Jacob for ever; and of his kingdom there will be no end” (Lk. 1:32-33)? Here, humanly speaking, it seemed that she was encountering “**the** complete negation of these words. On that wood of the Cross her Son hangs in agony as one condemned. This led Blessed John Paul II in his beautiful document on Mary to exclaim, “How great, how heroic then is the obedience of faith shown by Mary in the face of God's "unsearchable judgments"! How completely she "abandons herself to God" without reserve.

F. She didn’t just behold the self-emptying of her Son, who as St. Paul would say, “though he was in the form of God, did not count equality with God a thing to be grasped, but emptied himself, taking the form of a servant, being born in the likeness of men, humbled himself and became obedient unto death, even death on a cross” (Phil 2:6-7). She entered into that self-emptying.

G. “At the foot of the Cross Mary shares through faith in the shocking mystery of this self-emptying. This is perhaps the deepest ‘kenosis’ of faith in human history. Through faith the Mother shares in the death of her Son, in his redeeming death,” as the prophesied sword cut her soul to its depths.

H. **She who had had a union of blood with Jesus in the womb, now was united in his blood again at the Cross.**

I. This whole poignant experience is summarized in the first eight stanzas of the great 13th century hymn Stabat Mater:

J. At the cross her station keeping, **stood** the mournful mother weeping, **close to Jesus to the last.**

K. Through her heart, his **sorrow sharing**, all his bitter anguish bearing, now at length the **sword had passed.**

L. Oh how sad and sore distressed was that **mother highly blessed**, of the sole-begotten One!

M. Christ above in torment hangs; she beneath beholds the pangs of her dying glorious Son.

N. Is there one who would not weep, whelmed in miseries so deep Christ's dear Mother to behold?

O. Can the human heart refrain from **partaking in her pain**, in that Mother's pain untold?

P. For the sins of His own nation saw Him hang in desolation, all with bloody scourges rent.

Q. Bruised, derided, cursed, defiled, she beheld her tender child, till His Spirit forth he sent.

III. Jesus’ great bequeathal

A. But that wasn’t all that occurred at the Cross, her staying close to Jesus to the last. Something else occurred that directly impacts us.

- B. St. John tells us, “When Jesus saw his mother and the disciple whom he loved standing beside her, he said to his mother, “Woman, here is your son.” Then he said to the disciple, “Here is your mother.” And from that hour the disciple took her into his own home.
- C. This is one of the most beautiful scenes in the history of the world. When the arms of Jesus that were accustomed to wave as he spoke were spiked to wood, when the parched throat of the Word of God needed to be lubricated by gall, after he had given his body over to the Cross, his blood to the ground and was about to give his soul to his Eternal Father, Jesus’ love for us to the end still wasn’t finished.
- D. He looked down from the Cross and he saw his Mother and his Beloved Disciple. We know that this was St. John, but St. John himself, the author of the Gospel, used to refer to himself as the Beloved Disciple, because he wanted us to see ourselves in him, so beloved by the Lord that he would give everything to us. From the Cross, Jesus saw us, his beloved disciples, and gave us all he had left. He gave us what was most precious to him. He looked at his mother and said, “Woman, behold your Son!” And then he turned to his beloved disciple and said, “Behold your Mother!” (Jn 19:27). This was his last will and testament, in which he made us heirs of so great a treasure.
- E. These words, “Behold your Son!” were like a third annunciation. She had said her first fiat to God to the Archangel Gabriel in Nazareth. She had been saying her whole life long, but particularly in the previous few hours her second fiat to the second annunciation of Simeon fulfilled there at Golgotha. Now with her immaculate heart, with the same obedient faith that she demonstrated in her first two, she was saying “fiat” to the third annunciation given by Christ himself.
- F. Jesus had come from heaven to earth to found a new family. He described what constituted that family when someone said that his mother and relatives were standing outside where Jesus was. Jesus responded, “My mother and my brothers are those who hear the word of God and do it.” In every family, there is a Father and a mother. God, the Eternal Father of the only begotten Son, was that Father. For those who become members of the body of the Son, they become God’s own children. Moved by the Holy Spirit, they call out “Abba, Father!,” and “Our Father, who art in heaven!” Jesus turns to his mother. “My mother and my brothers are those who hear the word of God and do it” (Lk 8:21). Mary heard the Word of God and kept and treasured it so much that the Word literally took her flesh and dwelled in her among us. Just as she, by her yes in Nazareth three and a half decades earlier, had become the mother of God by giving the Lord his human body, so she at the foot of the Cross would now become the mother of that Son’s mystical body.
- G. Jesus called her “woman,” because, as we read in the book of Genesis, she was to be the “mother of all the living.” God had already put enmity between her, the woman, and the serpent, and in the formation of the new family of God as the new Eve was about to be born from pierced side of a sleeping New Adam, she, who had given that new Adam his human body, would become the model and exemplar of the Bride who will be united in one flesh with him.
- H. The words uttered by Jesus from the Cross signify that the motherhood of her who bore Christ finds a “new” continuation in the Church and through the Church, symbolized and represented by John.
- I. Mary had laid her first born in the manger. Now, John Paul II says, she would gather all her subsequent children “according to the Spirit” under the Cross. She would teach them how to be faithful, she would teach them how to pray, she would teach them how to be receptive to the Holy Spirit, she would teach them how to suffer and co-redeem together with her Son, she would teach them to say “fiat!” She does this still. She wants to do so with us as her children.
- J. As St. Josémaría Escrivá would say, “So at the Cross, we find a mother with two sons, face to face. Christ and you.”
- K. Our task is to receive this mother. John Paul II described this to the young people of the world assembled in Rome on Palm Sunday in 2003. He said that after hearing the words, “Behold your Mother” and receiving Jesus’ last testament of love, “John opened his house to Mary; in other words, he welcomed her into his life, sharing with her a completely new spiritual closeness. The intimate bond with the mother of the Lord will lead the ‘beloved disciple’ to become the apostle of that Love which he sensed in the heart of Christ toward the immaculate heart of Mary. ‘Behold your mother!’ Jesus directs these words to each one of you. He asks you to take Mary into ‘your home,’ to welcome her among all you have, so that she who, by fulfilling her maternal ministry, may teach you and model for you what it means for ‘Christ to be fully

formed in you.’ Mary will do this if you respond generously to the call of the Lord and persevere with faithfulness and joy to the Christian mission.”

- L. Cardinal Ratzinger wrote in his 2005 Stations of the Cross, right before the death of John Paul II and his election as Pope Benedict XVI: “Holy Mary, Mother of the Lord, you remained faithful when the disciples fled. Just as you believed the angels incredible message – that you would become the Mother of the Most High, so too you believed at the hour of his greatest abasement. In this way, at the hour of the Cross, at the hour of the world’s darkest night, you became the Mother of all believers, the Mother of the Church. We beg you: teach us to believe, and grant that our faith may bear fruit in courageous service and be the sign of a love ever ready to share suffering and to offer assistance.”
- M. These lessons of faith, of courage, of love are given by the Stabat Mater, in which we ask for the grace to enter her school at the foot of the Cross and take her and the lessons she teaches into our home, so that she might help Christ become fully formed in us as he is in her. We finish by praying:
1. O, thou Mother, **fount of love**, touch my spirit from above, **make my heart with thine accord**.
 2. **Make me feel as thou has felt; make my soul to glow and melt with the love of Christ our Lord**.
 3. Holy Mother, pierce me through; in my heart **each wound renew** of my Saviour crucified.
 4. Let met **share with thee his pain**, who for all my sins was slain, who for me in torments died.
 5. Let me mingle tears with thee, mourning Him Who mourned for me, **all the days that I may live**.
 6. **By the cross with thee to stay**, there with thee to weep and pray, this I ask of thee to give.
 7. Virgin, of all virgins blest, refuse not my request: let me in thy weeping share.
 8. Let me, to my latest breath, in my body **bear the death of that dying Son** of thine.
 9. Wounded with his every wound, steep my soul till it hath swooned in His very blood away.
 10. **Be to me, O Virgin, nigh**, lest in flames I burn and die, in that awful judgment day.
 11. Christ, when thou shalt call me hence, be Thy mother **my defense, be Thy cross my victory**.
 12. While my body here decays, may my soul Thy goodness praise, safe in Paradise with Thee. Amen.