30.
Mary—Vocation of the Mother,
Mother of the Vocation

That vocations come from God is something all of us believe. Very few callings, however, are first heard from the lips of an angel. For most of us, God works mysteriously in everyday circumstances and events, in relationships and encounters, in the inspirations born of good example and dedication that leap, like words off a page, from people around us. The Gabriels who step into our lives have flesh and blood. Their approach may be less spectacular than apparitions, but they make the presence of God every bit as real.

The Call of the Mother

Paintings of the annunciation, such as the well-known scene of Fra Angelico, give us a visual representation of the supernatural encounter, but one usually needs to look closely to appreciate how they also highlight Mary’s faith—her relationship with God before the annunciation took place. Mary may be praying when the angel arrives, or devoutly reading scripture. Yet how, we might ask ourselves, did Mary come to be a woman of prayer? How did the word of faith get sown in her heart, and in what ways was it nourished? A spiritual path had to be prepared in order for her to be able to hear the heavenly voice when it broke into her life. The Lord called, and she responded. But faith does not suddenly appear, in full blossom, in someone’s life; it has a history. Our relationship with God has to be awakened, cultivated, stretched and tested. Mary’s faith, too, must have had its history.
What is the history behind Mary’s vocation? In trying to answer this question, our minds turn automatically toward her family, the friendships she must have had, and the people she prayed alongside in worship services each Sabbath. Without such human contacts and exposure to the faith of others, it is hard to imagine how Mary would have ever been able to hear the angel’s message, let alone comprehend it. If she had not been raised in an atmosphere that fostered openness to God, she would have had no context in which to receive the angel’s words and grasp their meaning. The language faith speaks takes time to learn and years to master.

The Mary who gives us the Magnificat was well schooled in the religious traditions of her people and the great lessons of biblical faith. She knew the story of Abraham and how God had revealed himself to Abraham in the call to take a great risk: “Go from your country and your kindred and your father’s house to the land that I will show you” and “So Abram went” (Gen 12:1, 4). Perhaps Mary had pondered the words of Ruth, whose son would become the great-grandfather of David: “Where you go, I will go; where you lodge, I will lodge; your people shall be my people and your God my God” (Ruth 1:16). If Mary was familiar with the thanksgiving song of Hannah, Samuel’s mother, she must also have known the words spoken later by the young boy in the temple: “Speak, for your servant is listening” (1 Sam 3:10).

More often than not, however, the word of God needs human instruments to help with its translation. What this means, concretely, is that God’s call frequently comes “from below,” from within the community. Granted, the sense of being called is a graced inspiration, and the potential shape of a call may emerge as a result of reading the biography of an exemplary
Christian or from meditating on a portion of Scripture. But callings do not bypass ordinary human experience; in fact, they run right through it. The needs of people—their need for reassurance, their need of other men and women to accompany them along the journey of faith, their thirst for freedom and life—become a call of the Spirit.

Sometimes the call seems but a whisper, at other times it feels like a mighty rush; but the vocation is always heard through the people, since God reaches into our lives through theirs. Mary could hear God’s call because her people lived inside her, especially the lowly and the poor ones among them. Few things so confirm one’s experience of God and steady one’s religious commitment as living among families struggling to survive, sharing their world, and joining one’s life to theirs. Artists have depicted Mary as reading, but it’s not likely that she was so literate. The Scripture Mary learned she would have known largely from hearing, while faith would have enabled her to “read” the word of God in the faces and events that made up the everyday world of Nazareth.

**Annunciation in the Spiritual Exercises**

In his Spiritual Exercises, St. Ignatius intertwined the contemplation on the annunciation—the divine call to Mary—with the Trinitarian conversation about the state of the world. For the first thing the Trinity does, after viewing what has been going on in human history, is to call upon Mary of Nazareth to be the mother and teacher of the “one who was to come” (Luke 7:20). In the imaginative narrative sketched by St. Ignatius, the Divine Persons, witnessing the tragic loss of soul that is taking place in human lives, say, “Let us bring about the redemption of the human race.” Ignatius then adds “etcetera,” in order to invite the one contemplating to imagine more details of that
conversation, filled so richly with compassion and divine humility. For Ignatius, divine initiative is unthinkable without human response, and the human world would be without meaning unless it were founded on a relationship with God.

While the Divine Persons are contemplating the world, Mary at the very same moment is responding to the profound longing of God’s people for a new and definitive exodus. She is both handmaid of the Lord and handmaid of the Lord’s people. “Then the angel departed from her,” Luke writes. “Then”: that is to say, “only then,” because the heavenly messenger could not depart until Mary took the risk of faith, just as Abraham had once done. For the word of the Lord never returns to him empty: “so shall my word be that goes forth from my mouth; it shall not return to me empty, but it shall accomplish that which I purpose, and succeed in the thing for which I sent it” (Isaiah 55:11).

Saying yes to God’s call leaves Mary rejoicing, trusting (for she cannot see the future) and eager to talk with someone in the family who had also received vocational grace. She sets out from Nazareth, in haste, for “a Judean town in the hill country” in order to share her experience with Elizabeth, and to listen to Elizabeth share hers. The divine Persons “speak,” and their speech becomes a call. The two mothers likewise speak. Both are to have sons, whom they will hold for a while; and then they will lose them. But during the precious time they hold them, they will become the mothers of two vocations. The faith of the mothers will prepare the way for their sons to hear the voice of God and respond as prophets.

The Call of the Son

We may not be used to thinking of Jesus as having a vocation, but that is exactly what is suggested by the account of
his baptism. At the Jordan, Jesus said yes to God, just as his mother had done in the hour he was conceived. The gospels are reticent when it comes to giving details of Jesus’ upbringing. Luke’s verse “And Jesus increased in wisdom and in years, and in divine and human favor” condense in a few words the years of adolescence and young adulthood during which his interior life widened and deepened.

The heavenly voice that said “You are my Son, the Beloved; with you I am well pleased” is informing us, not Jesus, about his identity. These words were spoken, and are always being spoken, for the benefit of his followers, for those witnessing the event in their imaginations. The fourth evangelist reminds us, “This voice has come for your sake, not for mine” (John 12:30).

Still, the baptism in the Jordan marked the moment when Jesus began his mission, and the heavenly voice, echoing a text from Isaiah, affirmed his readiness and his call. “Here is my servant, whom I uphold, my chosen, in whom my soul delights; I have put my spirit upon him” (Isaiah 42:1).

Years of learning, thinking, observing, and of growing; years of being schooled by Mary’s word and example in the ways of God; years of Sabbath instruction and praying with the villagers of Nazareth; years of internalizing the historical fortunes of his people; years of conversing with friends about the hopes they shared for the restoration of Israel; years of learning what it meant to live, not for oneself, but for the people of God; years of hearing his mother hymn, perhaps like a mantra, “He brings down the powerful from their thrones and lifts up the lowly; he fills the hungry with good things, and sends the rich away empty”: these are the hidden years Luke
was summing up when he reports, so succinctly, “And Jesus increased in wisdom and in years.”

The lessons and experience of those years accompanied Jesus to the Jordan. Without them, the heavenly voice would have fallen on deaf ears. In a most real, most human sense, if Mary had not been a woman of faith, Jesus would probably not have known how to answer the divine call. Not even God’s call to Jesus would bypass his humanity. Mary’s response at the annunciation, therefore, needs to be taken with the utmost seriousness. She was not lending only her body to the divine initiative but her very humanity. Her vocation was to nurture the vocation of her son. And in this way Mary would nurture the vocations of all those who would later follow him.

The Mother as follower

The Son of God, in all humility, acquired much of his sensitivity and openness to the mystery of God from the mother who taught him to pray and how to live. If Jesus knew how to hear the word of God and put it into practice, then Mary must be credited with having given her son more than milk (Luke 11:27-28). And yet their relationship changed, for as the story unfolds further, Mary becomes increasingly the model disciple. The son learned from his mother, but afterwards the mother was learning from her son. To draw once again on the *Spiritual Exercises*, the first Easter contemplation St. Ignatius presents is the appearance of the risen Jesus to his mother. Scripture makes no mention of an appearance to Mary, but the piety and devotion Ignatius inherited took such an encounter as all but certain.

Now, why an appearance to Mary? Perhaps the motive behind this presumed apparition was simply the special bond between mother and son. But all the Easter experiences
mentioned in the gospels concern disciples, namely, the men and women who followed Jesus because they believed in him. For St. Ignatius, it could well be that the appearance to Mary underscored the affectionate bond between teacher and the most outstanding follower; Mary truly understood the mystery of the kingdom of God. When Jesus “appointed and sent out seventy others” (Luke 10:1), perhaps Mary was among them, even at their lead. In Christian piety, to find Mary is to find her son, for everything in her life points to him. And conversely, anyone who finds Jesus is sooner or later drawn to Mary, because the shape of his humanity cannot be understood apart from hers.

I would not want to argue that vocational awareness and devotion to Mary are directly proportional, but I think it can be said that regular contemplation of the annunciation sensitizes one’s imagination to the reality of divine intrusion. The presence of an archangel at the beginning is not going to make our journey of faith or the unfolding of our call any easier. Nevertheless, mindfulness of what happened to Mary enhances our anticipation, indeed our desire, that God would call us to be more than mere spectators as the Divine Persons decree the redemption of the human race.

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