

“Magnificat”

Tenth Annual Novena to the Immaculate Heart of Mary

The Fruit of Her Pondering: the Words of Our Lady

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The Magnificat is a perfect illustration of theme of our Novena, “The words of Our Lady, the fruit of her pondering”. This canticle is just that, words that are the result or fruit of her pondering, her contemplating God and His Goodness. So we see the interior life of Mary finding expression exteriorly. Scripture tells us “from the abundance of the heart the mouth speaks. The Magnificat originated in the very depths of her Immaculate Heart and in turn found voice on her lips.

The goal of this talk is to reflect upon the beautiful truths contained in each verse so as to better implement them in our own lives.

The setting for Mary’s song of praise is the Visitation. Mary, upon receiving the highest praise from her cousin Elizabeth, directs it immediately to God. Mary wants to draw attention to God and his Goodness.

My soul magnifies the Lord

What does it mean to magnify God? Is it possible to magnify or increase God who is infinite? No, It’s impossible. We cannot magnify God, that is, make Him greater in Himself. However, we can magnify God in ourselves. How so?

Think of a magnifying glass. If you place it over something tiny it enlarges it, it becomes more visible. How can we make God more visible? By being transformed into Christ. **We must become like Christ**. When we let His light shine through us, scripture says, others seeing our good works, will give glory to God. Ghandi said that if all Christians lived like Christians, there would be no Hindus. So let us heed the example of St. Francis who said to his brother monk: Let us go through town preaching Christ, and if we have to, we’ll use words.

I’d like to add a parenthetical note: Another way we are transformed into Christ is through suffering. Jesus gave the greatest glory to His Father by obediently and lovingly accepting, even embracing the cross- death on a cross. Blessed Dina wrote that “moral and physical pain is an eternal gold mine. If we understood the worth of our crosses, we would be rendered speechless

with happiness upon receiving them; trials, tribulations, anguish of all kinds would call forth songs of gladness and enthusiasm, and spontaneously we would burst forth into a jubilant song of thanksgiving” (Belanger). WOW! I don’t know about you, but I usually don’t get that excited when I suffer a humiliation or have a headache or some other cross. Yet, it is just this suffering that unites us to Christ. And if our suffering is offered in union with Christ’s sufferings, they become redemptive- they help save souls. Can you imagine a greater happiness than helping our heavenly Father’s wayward children return to home to Him, especially if they are our own family members and friends. Suffering no longer is a curse, but a blessing, a gift. St. John Vianney expressed that most people think they had a bad day if they had to suffer something. He considered it a bad day if he didn’t have something to suffer. He recognized the value of suffering. The more we resemble Christ crucified on earth, the more we will resemble Christ glorified in heaven. Let us ask Mary to teach us how to suffer, for who suffered more she did?

My soul magnifies the Lord. Mary does not say “I” magnify the Lord, but “my soul” magnifies the Lord. For the Jewish people, the soul or heart represented the deepest core of the person. Thus we see Mary praises God with her whole being, with her whole strength. This is no mere lip service. So we must ask ourselves, “Do I give God my attention when I pray or do I merely recite words”. “When I attend Holy Mass am I mentally present as well as physically present? Teresa of Avila teaches that vocal prayer must be accompanied by mental prayer. Am I aware of whom I am addressing? I’d like to add a word of encouragement regarding distractions. This same saint compared our thoughts to wild horses that run everywhere. We must simply acknowledge them and calmly return to our prayer. God sees and is pleased with our efforts. He calls us to be faithful, not successful.

The pronoun “my” is a tiny, but very significant word. It reveals that the beginning of the canticle does not refer, first and foremost, to the great and saving work that Yahweh completes in the history of the Israelites, but it refers specifically to Mary’s individual soul, to the personal grace granted to her exclusively. She is important, in herself, with respect to the Chosen People and with respect to all mankind. In the plan of creation and “recreation” or redemption, Mary occupies a public place uniquely hers (Manelli 174).

Who is this Lord whom the Virgin magnifies. He is the Most Holy and Triune God. Mary praises the eternal Father for associating her with His divine Fatherhood by making her the

mother of His own Son. She praises the Son of God for desiring to choose her to be His Mother. She praises the Holy Spirit for accomplishing in her the greatest of His works; that is, the Incarnation and all its consequent blessings for all mankind (Eudes 281).

My spirit rejoices in God my Savior.

The verb tense used in the Greek indicates that Mary already has been rejoicing and is continuing to rejoice in her Savior. This draws our attention back to the Incarnation. Mary recognizes that the child in her womb, her Jesus, is her Savior. Even the word Savior corresponds to the Hebrew name “Jesus” which means “God saves”. In Mt: 1;21 we read the archangel’s words “You shall call him Jesus, for he shall save his people from their sins”.

But in what sense does Mary speak of her Savior? Certainly not in the ordinary sense of one who saves or liberates from original sin and actual sin as this commonly applies to all other people. Mary rejoiced in her Savior because He had come into the world to save and redeem her first and foremost by preserving her from original sin and by showering her with such an abundance of graces that He made her His mediatrix and cooperator in the salvation of all mankind (Manelli 174).

We must be grateful to God and to Mary for this singular favor. Because she was found worthy and cooperated with God’s call, we have a Savior.

He has regarded the humility of his handmaid.

What is this humility or lowliness? It can be correlated with the kenosis or self emptying of Jesus. It designates a humble condition, a natural abasement to be understood in the sense of human littleness in the face of God’s greatness. In the Septuagint, the term lowliness corresponds to the term anawim of the Old Testament, which connotes the spiritual poverty and the radical dependence of a creature upon his Creator, because of which he trusts in God and not in himself (Manelli 176).

St. Paul writes, “When I am weak then I am strong”. This seems to be a contradiction. However, because Paul recognized his weaknesses, he did not trust in himself, but instead called upon the Lord to be his strength, his courage, his patience, etc.

Another illustration of this principle is found in the life of St. Faustina. One morning she had made a resolution to practice a particular virtue. By noon time she had failed several times and consequently bemoaned this fact to Jesus. He informed her the reason she was not successful in her was that she had depended on herself instead of on Him.

If you ask why God regarded the humility of Mary rather than her shining purity or other virtues, seeing that she possesses them all in the highest degree, St. Bernard will answer, “Virginity is highly praiseworthy, but humility is necessary”. St. John Eudes would add, “The former is counseled the latter is commanded. You can be saved without virginity but there is no salvation without humility. Mary pleased God with her virginity but she conceived God, the Son through her humility, which rendered her virginity pleasing to Him. O holy humility, thou hast given us a God-Man and a Mother of God” (Eudes 289).

Let us imitate Jesus and Mary in this virtue. Jesus, meek and humble of Heart, make our hearts like unto Thine. Fiat!

I’d like to add another parenthetical note since humility is so foundational to growth in holiness. Humility disposes us to be patient, not only with others, accepting them with their faults and idiosyncrasies, but perhaps more importantly, to be patient with ourselves. We can become discouraged if we are not making the spiritual progress we desire. Pride can make us want to be holy in a hurry, so we can take satisfaction in ourselves. We must be willing to put up with ourselves, defects and all, as we strive to grow in holiness. To encourage you, I offer you these words of Jesus (imagine Him speaking them directly to your heart):

“You worry about your many shortcomings and are afraid to look at Me anymore. You mustn’t do this. Offer yourself to Me just as you are. Don’t wait to be pleased with yourself. Be one with Me in your greatest shortcomings. I know all about human nature. I came to help and restore. Transplant yourself in Me not because of your worth, but because of my yearning” (Bossis).

Lastly, humility is not so much thinking less of ourselves as it is thinking of ourselves less. Humble people do not have ingrown eyeballs. Their focus is outward. Mary always thought of others. St. Therese said, I became happy when I forgot myself. Humility leads to peace and serenity of heart.

From this day all generations shall call me blessed.

In this verse “we find utterance given to one of the most marvelous prophecies of Scripture. What could be more precise than this oracle, and after it has been pronounced what could be, naturally speaking, more impossible than its fulfillment” (Manelli 178). What are the chances of a poor and obscure adolescent being praised throughout the ages? Yet from the beginning, Mary has been praised by the archangel Gabriel, St. Elizabeth, the Apostles, the early Church - the

Council of Ephesus declared her Theotokos (God-bearer), and in more contemporary times the Second Vatican Council has spoken of the necessity of Marian devotion. In fact **we** fulfill this prophecy every time we say the Hail Mary: Blessed are you among women!

Why will all generations call her blessed?

Her unique place in the mystery of Christ and in salvation history is the answer. Mary, herself, proclaims that she has been the singular, personal recipient of exceptional deeds. Concerning these exceptional deeds, St. Thomas of Villanova writes:

“We admire the miracle that God performed when He allowed His people to pass dry-shod across the Red Sea. That is a trifle. Here is something far greater: it is the immense ocean of the Divinity confined within the womb of a young and mortal virgin. We admire the burning bush that was not consumed. That is a little thing; here is a virgin who brings forth a Child while preserving her virginity intact. We admire the prophet Moses lying in a tiny basket of brush. That is insignificant; let us rather admire the King of Heaven lying in a manger of hay. We admire the prophet Elijah restoring a dead child to life. That is a small thing; let us admire the Son of God, co-equal and co-eternal with His Father, restoring Himself to life after having died on the Cross (Eudes 296).

I'd like to relate a story that conveys the magnitude and beauty of this reality. Some college students who visited the Holy Land were asked which place most moved them. Each replied independently from the others. Their unanimous response - the Church the Annunciation and specifically the seal on the floor which read: **Hic Verbum Caro Factum Est. Here the Word was made Flesh.** Wow! God who is utterly transcendent, utterly “other” comes down, in time, in space, to a particular place. Why? Just so He can be with us! Silence before this mystery. **His mercy is on those who fear him from generation to generation.**

With this verse the perspective of the Magnificat shifts from the plan of God regarding the person of Mary to the communal plan regarding all men awaiting salvation that is to say, those who fear God; those who desire to obey and serve Him in faithful fulfillment of His wishes. (This does not mean those who are afraid of God, but rather those who fear offending Him because they love Him and do not want to displease the One they love).

What is this mercy which is on those who fear Him. It is Jesus himself, the inexhaustible fountain of mercy. St. Augustine explains that the eternal Father is called the Father of Mercy because he is the Father of the Word Incarnate who is Uncreated Mercy itself. Mary is the

bearer of this Mercy. With the Incarnation the messianic mercy is poured out upon humanity for all ages. Jesus desires to pour out a whole ocean of graces on us. Let Mercy speak for itself:

“I am Love and Mercy itself... Let no soul fear to draw near to Me, even though its sins be as scarlet My mercy is greater than your sins and those of the entire world.. Come then with trust to draw graces... I never reject a contrite heart. Sooner would heaven and earth turn into nothingness than would my mercy not embrace a trusting soul” (Michalenko 27).

We who have received God’s mercy must show this mercy to others, through our words, actions and prayers. Jesus wants to shower His mercy on sinners. He told St. Faustina “You always console me when you pray for sinners. The prayer most pleasing to me is the prayer for their conversion. Know, My daughter that this prayer is always heard and answered.

Clearly, our God is a God of Mercy, a God of Love. May we honor Him by trusting in His mercy for Jesus revealed to St. Faustina and many other saints, that our sins do not wound His Heart as much as our lack of trust in His Goodness. So let us, with Mary glorify God by singing of His mercies.

He has shown the power of his arm; he has scattered the proud in the conceit of their heart. He has cast down the mighty from their thrones and has lifted up the lowly.

What is the arm of God that has shown its might? The saints tell us it is Jesus Himself. God has acted powerfully through Him. Through Him, the Father created all things, redeemed all things, vanquished the devil and triumphed over hell, opened the gates of heaven.

In the phrase he has scattered the proud we learn that not only has God determined not to save the proud man who is confident and self-satisfied, but just the contrary; He has decided at the opportune time to disperse and eliminate him and in his place lift up the lowly (Manelli 181). Examples from the Old Testament illustrating this are the defeat of the mighty Pharaoh by the meek Moses, the cruel Holofernes by the unarmed Judith, and the giant Goliath by the young shepherd David. There are numerous occasions when rash kings were dethroned; Nebuchadnezzar, Antiochus Epiphanes, and Saul. In addition, God has protected and governed the Church’s pontiffs, leaders, martyrs, virgins and all the faithful against powerful and cruel emperors throughout its history and during its most difficult times. **Satan himself, the prince of darkness, has been cast down** through the agency of a humble and hidden **virgin**, who in turn is exalted as the **Queen of heaven and earth** (God lifts up the lowly).

You’ve heard the maxim, crime doesn’t pay, well we learn here that pride doesn’t pay.

He has filled the hungry with good things and the rich He has sent away empty.

Fr. LaGrange suggests this verse be explained “against the backdrop of Eastern courts and their customs, where access was denied the poor because they had nothing to give, while it was permitted the rich who presented themselves with hands full of gifts to offer their sovereigns, who always repaid them with regal munificence. Mary proclaims here a reversal on God’s part. at the divine court the poor man, the hungry man, he whose hands are empty is satisfied and filled with good things. The rich man, instead, he whose hands are full is sent away empty without receiving any of the good things of God” However, it is not simply a reversal in the social and economic order, whereby the material poor become rich and the rich become poor. It is an assignment of goods totally different: the good things to be granted are spiritual and eternal goods (Manelli 185-86).

Mary is the example par excellence in this regard. She had always been poor in earthly goods, while she had been rich in every heavenly good. She proclaims in what consists authentic greatness, and the true, imperishable wealth of man.

He has come to the help of his servant Israel, for He has remembered his promise of mercy, The Promise He made to our Fathers, to Abraham and His children forever.

God likes to make promises because he wants to fulfill them. He makes promises because He wants to give to us and to give abundantly. The Father has even given us His own Son. Notice the pattern in this canticle: He [God] has... He has looked with favor, He has done great things, He has mercy, He has lifted up, He has filled. God is always giving. God is Love and love by its nature diffuses itself. It goes out of itself to others. God wants to give of Himself and even give His Self to us. Let us dispose ourselves to receive his gifts and in return let us give ourselves wholeheartedly to Him through the Immaculate Heart of Our Mother, Mary. With her let us sing our song of praise and thanksgiving – **My soul proclaims the greatness of the Lord and my spirit rejoices in God my Savior.**

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