

“Son, Why Have You Done This to Us?”
Tenth Annual Novena to the Immaculate Heart of Mary
The Fruit of Her Pondering: the Words of Our Lady
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Good Evening! My name is Sr. Mary Elizabeth and tonight I have the privilege of speaking to you about the third occasion in which Mary’s words are recorded for us in Sacred Scripture. This is the time when she found the twelve-year-old Jesus in the Temple after three days of searching. I have to admit that this is one of the more perplexing accounts from Sacred Scripture. On the surface, it seems like a normal story many face during childhood; a child seeking his or her independence, or through absentmindedness, is separated from the group. However, when we are dealing with the Incarnate Word, the Son of God, the second Person of the Blessed Trinity, it tends to change things slightly. In this deeper meaning, we can come to understand the elements that compare with our daily lives.

First to understand the story as Mary did, let us review the scenes Mother Marie Bernadette highlighted for us on Thursday. We can see how the mystery of her Son unfolded before her prior to the finding in the temple. The first time we encounter Mary is at the Annunciation; here she, a virgin, is greeted with the title “full of grace” and she says “yes” to becoming the mother of the “Son of the Most High”. Afterwards, she makes the difficult four day journey to see her cousin, Elizabeth, whom she has learned is pregnant, although advanced in years. Her cousin gives her a greeting like no other: “And how does this happen to me that the mother of my Lord should come to me?” She returns to Nazareth after three months but before she has a chance to settle she has to pack up and go to Bethlehem for the census. While away from home, she has her child and shepherds, who were told of his birth by angels, come to adore Him. Forty days later, she and Joseph take the child to Jerusalem for his presentation in the Temple and they are greeted by an aged man who says to Mary, “Behold, this child is destined for the fall and rise of many in Israel, and to be a sign that will be contradicted (and you yourself a sword will pierce) so that the thoughts of many hearts may be revealed” (Luke 2:34-35). We can be assured that no other mother experienced this with her child, no matter how special the child may be.

The amazing elements continue: while at home in Bethlehem, Wise Men from the east appear and offer to the child gifts: gold for the king, frankincense for God, and myrrh for his burial. Not having much time to reflect on the meaning of these gifts, the Holy Family has to pick up and flee to Egypt in order to escape the sword of Herod. After Herod's death, they discover it is safe to return to Palestine but they cannot settle in Bethlehem of Judea because it was being ruled by Herod's son, Archelaus. They, however, decide to return to Nazareth for a quiet life, a hidden life, an uneventful life. Yet it is not to be so easy.

Over ten years pass before the silence is broken to relate to us a story that Mary then adds to her experiences of this son she has been given. I would like to read you this story straight from the Gospel of St. Luke:

“Each year his parents went to Jerusalem for the feast of Passover, and when he was twelve years old, they went up according to festival custom. After they had completed its days, as they were returning the boy Jesus remained behind in Jerusalem, but his parents did not know it. Thinking that he was in the caravan, they journeyed for a day and looked for him among their relatives and acquaintances, but not finding him, they returned to Jerusalem to look for him. After three days they found him in the temple, sitting in the midst of the teachers, listening to them and asking them questions, and all who heard him were astounded at his understanding and his answers. When his parents saw him, they were astonished, and his mother said to him, ‘Son, why have you done this to us? Your father and I have been looking for you with great anxiety.’ And he said to them, ‘Why were you looking for me? Did you not know that I must be in my Father’s house?’ But they did not understand what he said to them. He went down with them and came to Nazareth, and was obedient to them; and his mother kept all these things in her heart” (Luke 2:41-51).

From all of the events that have preceded the finding in the Temple, we know that Mary is aware of her son and His mission. Jesus, too, knows who He is and what He is called to accomplish; Pope John Paul II commented on this Gospel story: “On this occasion, with his strong personality Jesus revealed that he was aware of his mission. He gave to this second

‘entry’ into his ‘Father’s house’ the meaning of his total gift of self to God which had already marked his presentation in the Temple” (Theotokos, 165). We know as well that Mary accepts the will of God as it is manifested to her but that does not take away the Mother’s love she has for her son. “Her words are the spontaneous cry of a mother’s heart” (Prat, 123); they express “the sorrow and grief she felt during the long search. She is a real mother. The straight-forward, down-to-earth narrative makes no effort to conceal her human feelings” (Stöger, 60)

Sometimes we forget that Mary is human like us; yet she can teach us and guide us so well. Even though she is without sin, she felt the pain that this separation evoked. When we suffer some pain or loss, we know that Mary is not far from us. Many times our suffering is caused by our sins; Mary experienced the trials of life, even though she was not guilty of sin. Mary knew what it was like to suffer the loss of a child and, in addition, she knew what it was to suffer the absence of God. While she would not know what it would be like to be deprived of God’s presence due to sin, she was able to glimpse it for three days to know what her children on earth, sinners, endure when they lose Jesus through sin. Her mother’s love reaches out to poor sinners as well.

We, too, can see reflected in Mary a respectful questioning of why she was asked to suffer this. Pope John Paul II again wrote, “Here we can discern an echo of the ‘whys’ asked by so many mothers about the suffering their children cause them, as well as the questions welling up in the heart of every man and woman in times of trial” (Theotokos, 166). Why did their child who was so obedient to her and Joseph stay behind unexpectedly? Fr. Benedict Groeschel observed, “The parents could have been spared the pain of this situation by God’s Providence, even by the thoughtfulness of Christ, but they were not” (47). We obviously see a deeper meaning to this enigmatic situation. Jesus, in his first recorded words, gives us the answer.

His reason for staying behind was not to cause them grief but to fulfill the will of His Heavenly Father. “He does not blame them that they had not this knowledge, but earnestly teaches them the lesson that they must subordinate their claims to the interests of his Heavenly Father” (Breen, 287). While they loved Jesus very much, they had to realize that He came first to do the will of His Heavenly Father. He will go down with them to Nazareth and be obedient to them; his first rule of life is to be about His Father’s business, no matter how much pain this may involve. “The revelation of his mystery as the Son wholly dedicated to his Father’s affairs proclaims the radical nature of the Gospel, in which even the closest of human relationships are

challenged by the absolute demands of the kingdom” (RMV, 20). Following God’s will is not always going to be easy but it is the way to true peace and blessedness.

We are all called to place God’s will above all other things. Mary knew this as she gave her “fiat” and, each time she experienced some suffering, she was able to renew her “fiat.” Pope John Paul II, in his catechesis on the Blessed Virgin Mary, said, “The mother of Jesus associated these events with the mystery of her Son, revealed to her at the annunciation. She pondered them in the silence of contemplation, offering her cooperation in the spirit of a renewed ‘fiat.’ In this way the first link was forged in a chain of events that would gradually lead Mary beyond the natural role deriving from her motherhood, to put herself at the service of her divine Son’s mission” (Theotokos, 167). Her role as mother was to include all those that Christ had redeemed.

Even at the age of twelve, Jesus was called to fulfill the will of His Heavenly Father, even if this meant that His mother and foster-father did not understand it: “Jesus’ life was dominated by an imperative (‘I must’) which inspired his activity and led him through his passion and death to glory. This was rooted in God’s will as it was expressed in scripture, and Jesus followed this unconditionally” (Stöger, 61). Here we have the mother following the example of the son.

She knew her part in Jesus’ mission; from the Vatican II document on the Church, *Lumen Gentium*, we are reminded: “Embracing God’s salvific will with a full heart and impeded by no sin, she devoted herself totally as a handmaid of the Lord to the person and work of her Son, under him and with him, by the grace of almighty God, serving the mystery of redemption. Rightly, therefore, the holy Fathers see her as used by God not merely in a passive way, but as freely cooperating in the work of human salvation through faith and obedience. For, as St. Irenaeus says, she ‘being obedient, became the cause of salvation for herself and for the whole human race’” (#56).

When Jesus speaks, Mary hears the voice of God. She did not understand but she does not seek clarification, she merely ponders His words in her heart.

“The fact that our Lady did not understand her Son’s answer is in no way disedifying, nor does it in any way mar the brilliance of her perfection; on the contrary, for poor sinners like us, so full of misery and imperfections, it is most consoling firstly because it brings us very close to her, and

secondly because it shows us that our frequent incomprehension of the supernatural does not necessarily imply separation from God. In this case the Blessed Virgin did not understand it. It is difficult to express all the implications to which St. Luke's observations give rise but they are all such as to emphasize the matchless perfection of Mary" (Suarez, 119-120).

Why did our Lord allow Mary to suffer in this way? Jesus "loved [her] too much to exclude [her] from an association in the sorrows of his own life. He demanded of [her] the sacrifice of that sorrow, to teach mankind in what rank the interests of God should be held. As Mary was to be closest to him in Heaven, she was to drink deeply of the chalice which he drank" (Breen, 284). Mary was to participate in Christ's redemption; this scene mirrors closely what will take place in the future when Christ is in the tomb for three days, absent from His Mother. Mary was called to suffer this separation for her to grow deeper in faith and to continue to grow in understanding of God's divine plan. For she knew that the most important thing in life was to follow the Lord and His plan; she knew this would not always make sense for she knew the passage from the prophet Isaiah: "my thoughts are not your thoughts, nor are your ways my ways, says the Lord" (55:8). Even in the midst of sufferings, she realizes that God had great things in store, well beyond her imagining.

What does this mean for each of us? How do we respond in the midst of trials and sufferings? How do we take Mary's example as our own? How do we surrender ourselves even to the things God allows to happen in our lives? Mary gives us the example and the means but how does this come to play in our everyday lives. I would like to relate a story of how to face trials as Mary did. We go back to the Jubilee Year, the year 2000 in which Pope John Paul II made a pilgrimage to the Holy Land. At one of the events, Jewish people gave testimony before the Pope to how Catholics had assisted them during the Holocaust, saving them from death. One woman's story, in particular, was noteworthy.

She was only thirteen when the concentration camp in which she had been sent to was liberated; she was all alone, very sick and did not even have the will to live. She was brought into a railway station where she was to wait for the train. During that time, a young man brought her some hot tea to drink; he came back a short time later with a cheese sandwich. She did not have the strength to eat the food but he made her eat it. I want to read the woman's own words,

“Then he told me I would have to walk to catch the train. I tried, but I fell down on the ground. He then took me in his arms and carried me for a long time. All the while the snow fell. I remember his brown jacket, the tranquil voice who told me about his parents’ death, and his brother’s, the loneliness he felt, and the need not to be overcome by sorrow and to fight for life. His name was indelibly imprinted on my memory” (“Karol Wojtyła saved my life...”) By now you know that the young man’s name was Karol Wojtyła, the future Pope John Paul II, and Edith Zierer, at the age of 66, was finally able to thank the man who saved her life. From her remembrance, we can see that not only did he save her physically but also gave her spiritual encouragement to continue in the face of this great suffering.

Our Lord allows us to participate in His cross; the more we understand this the more we will be able to accept the sufferings that make up our lives. St. Augustine wrote, “God by making us wait [we can add suffer], stretches desire. Stretching desire, he stretches the soul, stretching the soul, he makes it capable of receiving...Such is our life: we must endeavor to desire” (Arminjon, 252). If we are going to be able to receive Jesus as Mary did, we need to see these as opportunities to grow in the love of God. Suffering is a mystery: it is a purification, a drawing closer to our Lord.

We could think that if our Lord wanted us to follow Him, we would always feel His presence and be encouraged on the path to Heaven. Yet from our Scripture story, that is not the case. Our Lord allows us to experience a distance from Him, not to draw us away from Him, but to draw us closer to Him. He wants always to seek Him. “Wondrously inventive are the ways of divine love. If we always felt the delights of Christ’s presence within us, we would (for such is the force of habit) fail to appraise so inestimable gift at its true value” (Kane, 164).

On this feast of Corpus Christi, let us realize that He is always in His Father’s house and we can come to Him present in the tabernacle. It is there that we can learn from Him: “The divine silence of Christ in His school of love, the tabernacle, will breathe into our souls the peace of God and will make our burdens light” (Kane, 166). We can speak to Him and pour out our hearts to Him. Our conversation does not have to be eloquent or erudite. “He desires [us] to come to Him with humble simplicity and to talk with Him with childlike candor, telling Him in the language of the heart, rather than the measured accents of the tongue, of the pain that His crosses inflict and the grief that saddens [our] souls” (Kane, 167). He desires that our sufferings be a way of leading us into the love of His wounded Sacred Heart.

I would like to conclude with a final story, one many of you will recognize for many have found it helpful to read and reflect upon in time of sorrow. May we not be overcome by sorrow but always open to the will of God and see God's plan in our lives as Mary did:

One night I dreamed I was walking along the beach with the Lord. Many scenes from my life flashed across the sky. In each scene I noticed footprints in the sand. Sometimes there were two sets of footprints, other times there were one set of footprints. This bothered me because I noticed that during the low periods of my life, when I was suffering from anguish, sorrow or defeat, I could see only one set of footprints. So I said to the Lord, "You promised me Lord, that if I followed you, you would walk with me always. But I have noticed that during the most trying periods of my life there have only been one set of footprints in the sand. Why, when I needed you most, you have not been there for me?" The Lord replied, "The times when you have seen only one set of footprints in the sand, is when I carried you" (Stevenson).

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