

“The Motherhood of Mary: Mother of God and Our Mother”

Tenth Annual Novena to the Immaculate Heart of Mary

The Fruit of Her Pondering: the Words of Our Lady

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Last night Sr. Cecilia Marie told you that the words, “Do whatever He tells you” are the last recorded words of Mary in Scripture. With this evening’s talk, I am opening the second half of the novena series with words from our Lady of Guadalupe, spoken in the first half of the 16th century to St. Juan Diego. In the midst of one of their conversations, she told him, “Why are you concerned? Am I not here? I who am your mother?” These seem to me, the most tender words spoken by Our Lady.

Assuredly I do remember that we are studying and praying over the *words of Our Lady, the fruit of her pondering and contemplation*, however, I want to begin this evening’s presentation by considering the times, the events, and the content of words in Scripture spoken *to* Mary. With this background we will have a better understanding of Mary’s words to St. Juan Diego – and yes, to all of us.

Mary is spoken to only five times in all of Scripture:

- By the angel Gabriel at the annunciation
- By Elizabeth at the visitation
- **By Jesus** at the finding in the Temple
- **By Jesus** at the wedding in Cana
- **By Jesus** from the Cross

Through observation, prayer and reflection, not necessarily through a systematic study, I think we can look at these five passages to learn what it means to call Mary, mother. Undoubtedly, she is the Mother of Jesus, the Incarnate Word. The Son of God is the Son of Mary. Just as truly, she is our mother.

Let us, first of all, acknowledge the mindset of the ancient Jewish world. In the ancient Semitic mindset, a name was of utmost importance. Your name revealed your identity, you innermost being,

who you really are and what your mission is. To know someone's name meant to know him deeply, not just as an acquaintance. To call someone by name meant you had a certain authority over him. To change someone's name meant to give him a new identity and a new mission. (Hence, it is in this tradition that we change our names when we begin our religious lives.) Let me give you a few examples from Scripture.

- From the Old Testament: Abram's name was changed to Abraham. God gave him a new identity and mission; he was to be the father of a multitude, the father of the chosen people;
- Again from the Old Testament: Jacob's name was changed to Israel to reflect his new identity as the one who struggled with God;
- From the New Testament we have the most familiar example of all. Simon's name was changed to Peter, which means rock. In the Old Testament, God alone was described as a rock. No one else is rock. Before Simon's name was changed, "rock" was never used as a name. Being "rock" is God's own; in the change of Simon's name to Peter, Jesus shares being "rock" with Simon, allowing him to be the foundation, the rock on which He would build His Church.

In Scripture, names and their uses are very important. In short and in the Holy Father's words, "In Semitic usage, a name expresses the reality of the person" (JPII, *Theotokos*, 90). Now, what does all this have to do with Mary as Mother?

We first meet Mary at the annunciation. Luke introduces this section by taking us to "a town of Galilee called Nazareth to a virgin betrothed to a man named Joseph of the House of David, and *the virgin's name was Mary*" (Lk 1:27). That is not, however, how the Angel addresses her. The passage continues: "And coming to her [the angel Gabriel] said, 'Hail, full of grace.'" The title "full of grace" is being used here as a name; knowing what we do about the significance of a name, this "shows the deepest dimension of [Mary's] personality: [she is so] fashioned by grace and the object of divine favor that she can be defined" as 'full of grace' (ibid, 90).

It was not Gabriel's decision to address Mary as "full of grace." Angels are messengers of God; they do and say only that which they are commanded to do or say. Thus, "fullness of grace" is the name Mary possesses in the eyes of God" (ibid, 88).

Pope John Paul II says, “fullness of grace” thus “seems to be the proper way to describe the woman destined to become the mother of Jesus” (ibid, 87). In fact, the Holy Father continues, “Calling her ‘full of grace’ ... the angel acknowledges her as the woman endowed with a lasting perfection and a fullness of sanctity, without shadow of sin or of moral or spiritual imperfection” (ibid, 105). Let me repeat the Holy Father’s words, by “calling her ‘full of grace’ ... the angel acknowledges her as the woman endowed with a lasting perfection and a fullness of sanctity, without shadow of sin or of moral or spiritual imperfection.”

Why? Why would God bestow such a magnificent gift upon anyone? Why show such mercy? And even before the coming of the Savior? Mary is given this name “full of grace” *before* she conceived Jesus. In my question I give you the answer! In eternity there is no time; through the future merits of her Son, Jesus the Christ, Mary is redeemed, saved from sin, in order that she be found worthy (by pure gift) to be the Mother of God. Every grace, every gift given to Mary is in relation to her vocation as the Mother to God.

The name “full of grace” reflects the inner reality in which she was created, free of all sin, original and personal, indicating her mission of giving a human nature to the Divine Person of the Son. Mary is prepared before hand, from the first moment of her conception, and from all eternity in the mind of God, to be *the Mother*.

The fact that Mary is the Mother of God does not mean that she is the source of His divinity. The Holy Father explains it this way, “He who is born of Mary is *already* Son of God ... His virginal birth ... shows that He is Son of God even in his humanity” (ibid 120). Mary could only give what Mary had! She gave the pre-existing Son of God his humanity. But since His humanity cannot from the annunciation onward, be separated from His divinity, she formed in her womb his body and gave birth to the Divine Person who possessed both a divine and a human nature. Thus, we have the first step in our journey of realizing how Mary is Mother.

The second time Mary is spoken to in Scripture makes this extremely clear. Jesus is only weeks old in the womb of Mary when she travels to be of assistance to her aged and pregnant kinswoman Elizabeth. Filled with the Holy Spirit, Elizabeth greets her with the words, “Most blessed are you among women, and blessed is the fruit of your womb. Who am I that the *Mother of my Lord* should

come to me?” Even before His birth, Mary is recognized and proclaimed as the Mother of God! That is who and what she is ... this is her purpose -- to be Mother of the Lord and because of this great gift, she will be called “blessed for all generations.”

Moving ahead about 12 years, we have the third time Mary is spoken to. The occasion is the finding of the Child Jesus in the Temple after a three day loss. It is interesting that this is the only occasion when she is not given a title or a name. Mary asks Him, “*Son*, why have you done this? Your *father and I* have been looking for you with great anxiety” (Lk 2:48). She claims her rightful position and she calls him ‘son,’ coupling herself with his legal father. Jesus’ **vocal** reply does not acknowledge the importance of that relationship. In fact, it **seems** that His reply is more of a rebuff. He answers, “Why were you looking for me? Did you not know that I must be in *my Father’s* house?” The Temple was not Joseph’s house! He is here indicating His identity as a divine Person and neither Mary nor Joseph can claim to be his parent in that realm.

What is happening? Jesus begins to separate Himself from a purely physical relationship with Mary. He does not even acknowledge her concern *but instead* points to His true Father. **This is key.** Mary’s role is thus beginning to change. He is telling her and us that there is more than the physical relationship.

His **non-vocal reply** is less harsh; He knew her authority and her duty as His mother and so, Scripture says, “He went down with them and came to Nazareth and was obedient to them” (Luke 2:51).

This verse I just read indicates an aspect of motherhood other than the conception and birthing of a child. There is much more to motherhood than the physical aspect. Motherhood consists also in nurturing, teaching and forming the child. Mary was responsible for this in regards to Jesus. She raised Him and taught Him everything that He needed a human nature to know how to do: walk, read, etc. So, upon their return to Nazareth, she continued His formation. This, too, is what it means to be a mother.

I want to look at the last two instances Cana and Calvary together, for they are a continuation, one of the other, and in both, when Jesus speaks to Mary, He does not now use the name “mother,” but

gives her a new name; He names her “woman”: a name which sounds harsh to our ears, but would not have sounded harsh to Mary. Why “woman”?

The first one to be called woman was the first woman! Reading from Genesis:

“The man said:

This one, at last, is bone of my bone and flesh of my flesh;

This one shall be called woman, for out of ‘her man’ this one has been taken” (Gen 2:23).

She is to be his helpmate, his companion. Instead of helping, though, Eve leads Adam astray and out of pride they disobey the Lord. She, however, is to be called ‘mother of the living’ (Gen 3:20).

There is another “woman” mentioned in Genesis: immediately following the original sin of Adam and Eve we have God’s response.

God immediately presents them with the solution, the remedy for the fall; God promises a savior, but not a savior in isolation. Speaking to the devil, God says,

“I will put enmity between you and *the woman*
and between your offspring and hers.

He [the offspring] will strike at your head
while you strike at his heel.”

God is not speaking of Eve, but of a future woman. As Eve was instrumental in the fall of man, so this “woman” will be instrumental in the coming of the savior. This savior is first referred to as the offspring of the woman, the woman who is at enmity with satan. Who could this be other than the one hailed by the angel as “full of grace.” *She is “the woman.”* Jesus uses this name for Mary at Cana and at the Cross.

At Cana, in response to her concern about the shortage of wine, Jesus replied, “Woman, how does your concern affect me? My hour has not yet come” (Jn 2:4). Here He is indicating that His public ministry is beginning through her request, that is, through her instrumentality. And so, with the beginning of his public ministry, her relationship with Him dramatically changes. So much so that Jesus will later say that His mother, brothers and sisters are those who hear the word of God and

keep it. This was not an insult to Mary, for no one ever heard the word of God and kept it better than she. What is happening? Jesus is directing us away from over-emphasizing a physical relationship when what is now important is the spiritual, the doing of His will, being His disciple.

When Jesus, from the Cross, uses this same name for Mary, Jesus is revealing His triumph, and with Him the triumph of the woman, over the serpent. On Calvary Jesus tells the world, in fact, all generations, that Mary is the woman of the promise, thus indicating his *victorious* death on the Cross. In fact, Jesus' words, "It is finished" were commonly used by the victor of a race of an athletic competition. It has a similar meaning to "I won!" He has triumphed over the serpent, crushing his head, redeeming us all from slavery to the devil.

From the Cross, as part of His last will and testament, Jesus gave Mary to us. In great agony, looking down and seeing Mary and John standing there He said, "Woman, behold your son." To John, He said, "Behold your mother." *She is our mother*. His word is not a suggestion; His word is a command. His word is efficacious, effecting what He states. He is not advising us to foster Marian devotion. He is stating a reality, a fact. *Mary is our mother*. From the Cross Jesus bestows upon each of us individually Mary's maternal care and protection.

He is bequeathing Mary to us. He is willing us his mother, establishing for us a new relationship: His own mother becomes the mother of all mankind and we, in turn, become her children (*Seven Words of Jesus and Mary*, 39). Not a bond of blood, but a spiritual bond unites us. "Mary had seen God in Christ; now her Son was telling her to see [Him] in all Christians. ... She had given birth to the King; now she was begetting the Kingdom" (*ibid.*).

Because we seldom consider it, the very thought of Mary becoming mother of humanity is overwhelming. We have become so used to seeing the Madonna and Child at Bethlehem, pictured on Christmas cards, that we forget this same Madonna is holding us, you and me, on Calvary and forever. The famous late Archbishop Fulton J. Sheen wrote, "At the manger, Christ was only a babe; at Calvary, Christ was the head of redeemed humanity. At Bethlehem, she was the mother of Christ; on Calvary, she became the Mother of Christians. In the stable, she brought forth her son without pain and became the Mother of Joy; at the cross, she brought us forth in pain and became the Queen of Martyrs" (*ibid*, 39-40).

“ ‘Behold you son!’ It was a second nativity! Mary had brought forth her First-born without labor in the cave at Bethlehem; she now brings forth her second-born, John [*meaning all of us*], in the labors of the Cross. At this moment Mary is undergoing the pains of childbirth, not only” for John, but for all of us (*SLW*, 25).

Regarding these words of Christ from the Cross, Pope John Paul points out: “The words of the dying Jesus actually show that his first intention was not to entrust his Mother to John [merely to take care of a family problem!], but *to entrust the disciple to Mary and to give her a new maternal role*” (*Theotokos*, 188). He continues, “The reality brought about by Jesus’ words, that is, Mary’s new motherhood in relation to the disciple, is a further sign of the great love that led Jesus to offer his life for all people. On Calvary this love was shown in the gift of a mother, his mother, who thus became our mother too ... Jesus’ words ‘Behold your son’ *effect what they express*, making Mary the mother of John and of all the disciples... On the cross Jesus did not proclaim Mary’s universal motherhood formally, but established a concrete maternal relationship between her and the beloved disciple. In the Lord’s choice of words we can see his concern that this motherhood should not be interpreted in a vague way, but should point to Mary’s intense, personal relationship with individual Christians. May each one of us ... fully acknowledge her as our own Mother, and trustingly commend ourselves to her maternal love” (*ibid*, 189-190).

It is after He gives us His Mother that Jesus says, “It is finished.” With the gift of Mary He has given us all: His Body, His Blood, His very life and His Mother.

But, what does it mean to say, “Mary is our mother”? *How* is Mary our mother?

The Second Vatican Council answers this question in the last chapter of the *Dogmatic Constitution on the Church*, I quote, “Thus in a wholly singular way she cooperated by her obedience, faith, hope and burning charity in the work of the Savior in restoring supernatural life to souls. For this reason she is a mother to us in the *order of grace*” (*LG* 61). It is *because* she united her will with God’s and participated in the work of the Savior that she is our mother. This participation began long before Good Friday. She began her participation when she agreed to give the Second Person of the Blessed Trinity a human nature and a human body with which to suffer and thus redeem us. By becoming

the mother of the head of the Mystical Body, she, by necessity, becomes the mother of the Body itself.

As I mentioned when speaking about the finding in the Temple, being a mother does not stop at giving birth. Nurturing the child is the on-going act of mothering. So it is with Mary's motherhood for us. Mary's true motherhood, her maternal presence, continues as she intercedes in obtaining graces, spiritual assistance, for us, leading us to her Son and, ultimately, to eternal life. For a Scriptural reference for this we need only look to the Acts of the Apostles; Mary is there praying with the Apostles for the coming of the Spirit. She who knew what it was to be overshadowed by the Spirit is here praying for the infant Church (Acts 1:14).

We can also look to the Old Testament for some clarification on Mary's motherhood. The early Jewish kings had more than one wife; Solomon, for example, had 300 wives and 700 concubines. Who was his queen? His mother. Listen to this touching passage from the First Book of Kings (2:19-20). "Then Bathsheba went to King Solomon to speak to him for Adonijah [Bathsheba was asked to intercede for Adonijah], and the king stood up to meet her [bowed low] and paid her homage. Then he sat upon his throne and a throne was provided for the king's mother, who sat at his right." King Solomon stood paid homage to his mother and then seated her on the throne at his own right hand.

Mary is the Queen Mother; she is Jesus' right hand, first at the right hand of his throne, the Cross, and now at his throne in glory. As our mother she will intercede for us.

We can also go to the teachings of the Second Vatican Council for further explanation. I quote, This motherhood of Mary in the order of grace continues uninterruptedly from the consent which she loyally gave at the annunciation and which she sustained without wavering beneath the Cross until the eternal fulfillment of all the elect. Taken up to heaven she did not lay aside this saving office but by her manifold intercession continues to bring us the gifts of eternal salvation. By her maternal charity, she cares for the brethren of her Son, who still journey on earth surrounded by dangers and difficulties until they are led into their blessed home (*LG 62*).

More simply stated by St. John Vianney: “Mary will not rest until all her children are in heaven.” Her motherhood began at the Annunciation; it was fully revealed, universalized and perfected on Calvary with the words, “Woman, behold your son.”

Jesus did not stop even there. To John *and to us* He added: “Behold your mother.” As I said, this is not a mere suggestion. If Mary is our mother, we are her children. This is not just a “take” affiliation; we have certain duties and responsibilities in this new relationship. Listen to the words of the Code of Canon Law (1186):

To foster the sanctification of the people of God the Church recommends to the particular and filial veneration of the Christian faithful the Blessed Mary ever Virgin, the Mother of God, whom Christ established as the Mother of the human race....

That is the law of the Church ... to have a particular and filial veneration for Mary.

We are “to love her as Jesus did with filial affection” and respond “to her motherly love as true children” (*Theotokos*, 191). When speaking of these words of Jesus, the Holy Father said, “In the light of this entrustment to his beloved disciple, one can understand the authentic meaning of Marian devotion ... It places Christians in Jesus’ filial relationship to his mother, putting them in a condition to grow in intimacy with both [Himself and Mary]. The Church’s devotion to the Virgin is ...based on Christ’s will.” The Holy Father continues, “The words ‘Behold your mother,’ express Jesus’ intention to inspire in his disciples an attitude of love for and trust in Mary ... At the school of the Virgin the disciples [that’s *us*] learn to know the Lord deeply, as John did, and to have an intimate and lasting relationship of love with Him. They also discover the joy of entrusting themselves to the Mother’s maternal love, living like affectionate and docile children. *The history of Christian piety teaches that Mary is the way which leads to Christ and that filial devotion to her takes nothing from intimacy with Jesus. Indeed,*” says Pope John Paul, “*it increases and leads to the highest level of perfection*” (*Theotokos*, 192).

John, says the Gospel, “from that hour on he took her into his home.” As her children, we too must “take Mary into our homes” and make room for her in our daily life, recognizing her role in our journey of salvation. “Mary wants us to invoke her, to approach her confidently, to appeal to her as our Mother” (Escriva). And so we have Mary herself telling us all of this when she speaks to St. Juan Diego, “Am I not your mother? Is there anything you need?”

Place all your needs in her Immaculate Heart and trust that your loving mother will present them to Our Lord, asking that they be answered according to His will. Trust her as your loving mother; go to her as your loving mother. She will never disappoint you.