

Behold Your Mother!

Gospel: John 19: 25-27

Unlike St. John, I can't remember,
at what hour we took Mary into our home,
because I wasn't born to this world when she came.

I do know that the icon of Mary, Our Mother of Perpetual Help
was given as a wedding gift to my mother and father in 1943,
by her oldest brother, my uncle, Father Lawrence Lynch,
just before he went to war.

He was a United States Army chaplain,
assigned to the Pacific with Fighting Sixty-Ninth, the Irish Regiment.

My mother was encouraged to give Mary a place of honor
in the home and to introduce her to the family.

"*Make her known and loved!*" were my uncle's instructions.

Unfortunately, my uncle never saw how well my mother carried out his wish.

On the night of April 25th, 1945, on the island of Okinawa
he was killed instantly by an exploding mortar,
while giving communion to a dying soldier from Brooklyn, NY.

He was 38 years old.

When they carried his body back to the medic's station
they found a holy card of Our Mother of Perpetual Help,
in his shirt pocket, just to the right
of a where a piece shell shrapnel had pierced his heart.

He had distributed thousands of these cards to Marines and GI's
all throughout his tour of the Pacific.

A framed picture of Fr. Lawrence

dressed in his army uniform sitting behind his office desk,
occupied a place of honor on the piano
in our home for everyone to view.

As you can see, he was very handsome
and had warm smile and dark Irish eyes.
The only thing my mother told us about her older brother, Lawrence,
was that he was our uncle and a priest
who had given his life for his country.
At this point she would always cry
And it became difficult for her to continue the story. [REDACTED]

Six years after he death, on October of 1951, I came into world.
I was the sixth of nine children. [REDACTED]

And I was not a full-term birth.
My mother had fallen down the back stairs
while I was still in her womb,
and began to hemorrhage badly.
She was raced to the hospital where I was immediately extracted
from her womb, a seven-month-old *preemie*,
kicking and screaming for life.

When I was four years old,
I remember being formally introduced to
Mary, Our Mother of Perpetual Help,
in the foyer of our home, in Norfolk, Virginia.
It was a Saturday evening and my mother had gathered
all my brothers and sisters around her image to pray.
My father, who was a Captain in the Navy,
was away in the Mediterranean for six months
and we prayed the rosary every Saturday until he returned.

I must confess, my first impression
of this icon of Our Mother of Perpetual Help
didn't capture my imagination or my fancy.
She didn't win my affections.
She seemed so dull and lifeless.

The only thing I found intriguing about the icon
was the way Mary's eyes seemed to be always looking at me.
But her image was far from life-like.
It wasn't a portrait of Mary in real life,
like the lovely painting of the Assumption,
that hung in my aunt's hallway.

Like the picture of Father Lawrence
on the piano dressed in his army uniform,
the icon of Our Mother of Perpetual Help
remained in our home and never left. ■■■■■

Over the years, wherever and whenever we moved, she came with us
and always occupied the same place of honor,
on the wall of the main foyer,
just to right of the front door as you entered,
always looking at you.
You couldn't help but notice her compassionate eyes,
with a touch of sadness,
that seemed to know who you were and to whom you belonged.

Years ago, I read a small book entitled:
"Grotto Stories: From the Heart of Notre Dame"
which is a collection of stories written by alumni and friends
about the grotto of Our Lady,
located on the campus of Notre Dame University.

What's remarkable about this book is
that it clearly reveals that on a campus
where football often reigns as "King"
and higher education tends to be the "Pearl of Great Price,"
this shrine of Our Lady of Lourdes for many has been
and is the "heart of that campus."

It made me realize that the icon Our Mother of Perpetual Help
that had come to our house in the early 1940's,

was also the heart of our home.
She was a household fixture, like a light switch
whose presence in our lives was often taken for granted
. . . until we needed her.
Then we'd reach out for her and she'd "turn on the help."
Over the years, the constant repetition of "Hail Mary's"
had an effect on me,
and created a familiarity with Mary
which helped me to feel more at home with her.

I am convinced that this simple relationship with Mary,
enabled her to become a real presence in my childhood.
Speaking to her became easy, although never at great length.
Sometimes it was just a quick glance.
Other times, it was a quick plea or a prayer and out the door I'd go.
But she was always there "patient waiting" quietly drawing me to Christ.
And I believe that what she was quietly doing with me,
she is also doing for the whole Church
she is drawing us to Christ.

Two thousand years ago, when the Holy Spirit
touched the womb of Mary,
a prediction arose from the lips of the Virgin:
"All generations will call me blessed."
She was more right than she might have imagined.
Mary of Nazareth, the mother of Jesus Christ,
is today the most celebrated and venerated woman of all history.

Particularly, since the Papacy of Pope St. John Paul II,
there has been an increasingly renewed devotion
to Mary in the Church.

Two years ago, prior to COVID,
nearly five million pilgrims journeyed to Lourdes in France,
and ten million went to Guadalupe in Mexico.

Millions more went to Fatima, Czestochowa, Medjugorje
and American sights such as Emmitsburg, Maryland
and the National Shrine of the Immaculate Conception in D.C.
It is estimated that 20 per cent of the vocations in the Church today
are men and women who have made a pilgrimage
to one of these shrines
and experienced Christ calling them through Mary.

So, what's behind all this excitement?

What is there about the mystery of Mary that inspires
such a global outpouring of attraction to her?

Three reasons!

First, ever since the Council of Ephesus in 431,
which declared Mary was truly the Mother of God,
the Church has recognized that Mary is essential to understanding Jesus.
The Incarnation of the Son of God is forever linked to Mary.

Secondly, the Saints of the Church, witness to a spiritual truth:
the closer we get to Mary, the closer she brings us to Christ.
This is the primary premise of St. Alphonsus Ligouri's classic work:
"The Glories of Mary."

And this makes complete sense to me.

What mother doesn't want to acquaint us with her child?

Authentic love for Mary always generates enthusiastic love for Jesus.

Thirdly the reason for this exuberant new attention to Mary
is because there is hunger in our world today for the supernatural.
There is a desire for God, which is planted in every human heart.
And our secular culture, with its technology and advanced communications,
its modern transportation and its marvels in medicine,
has failed to help the hungry heart find God.
It is very clear today in this secular desert that the soul is thirsting for God.

And I believe that the quiet, maternal warmth of Mary

is the easiest and most non-threatening road back to God
whom we seek.

In this tawdry culture - Mary is utter beauty.

In this modern spiritual wasteland - Mary is a spring of fresh water.

In this flattened landscape that tries to shut out all vestiges of heaven,
Mary is the "gate of heaven" that opens us to God.

Mary rejoices in her calling to open our hearts to Jesus.

Her only calling is to fill us with Jesus.

She points to Jesus, never to herself.

She asks us to carry Christ into the world.

You see, like Mary, we are all pregnant with Christ,
not physically of course,
but we are pregnant in a real way none-the-less.

Mary bore God within her,
and we bear God within us as well.

Like Mary, our model, it is our task to bring God,
his power and presence to birth in this world.

Now we can all be responsible or irresponsible mothers.

If we are to bring the presence of God to birth within our lives
we must nourish this presence in its incipient stages within ourselves.

We must feed it with prayer,
nourish it with the scriptures,
and keep ourselves, its life support, healthy.

We must love this presence.

We must practice the discipline and attentiveness
necessary to care for the growth of Christ
if we want Christ to reach the light of day.

Mary, the God bearer, is our model in our task.

She, once and for all,
bore the eternal God into the world of history.

But we too must help to accomplish this task.
We too must bear God for one another
 so that He might bring us ever closer to himself.
God has placed his life in our hands, his growth in our wombs,
 and it is our job to bring him to birth in our lives.

For many years after Vatican II,
 I think many priests, including myself,
 viewed devotion to Mary as something optional.
While we maintained a quiet devotion to her,
 we presumed it was largely a private affair,
 like having devotion to a particular patron saint.
But at some point, I realized I was mistaken.
A Marian spirituality is not an optional, private devotion.
Rather, God wills this woman
 to be an integral part of our Christian spiritual lives.

Before he died, Jesus gave his mother to us,
 symbolized by “the beloved disciple” whom Jesus loved.
He entrusted her to us in order to help us
 when we are overcome by the terrifying trials of life.
Through Mary’s compassionate presence at the cross,
 the suffering that continues to play itself out in our life
 becomes more deeply human.
We are encouraged by this loving gesture
 to allow Mary’s compassionate heart to embrace us
 for she promises us serenity, security, surrender, confidence,
 newness, another chance, life.
And how do we do this?
By taking Mary into our “homes”!
Spiritually, this means taking Mary into our lives,
 to take her as companion and counselor,
 aware that she knows better than we do God’s wishes for us.
If we learn to converse with Mary and listen to her in all things,

she will become our ‘teacher’ in God’s ways,
guiding our inner lives without the din of words.
This is not some abstract possibility, but a real fact, experienced today,
as in the past, by numerous persons.

Listen to one person’s testimony. *“Dear Father, for some time now I have had the desire to give Mary, more space in my life. I like to invite her to prayer. With great trust, I offer myself to her as a place where she can come to live again on earth. Therefore, I think I must become a space, a vessel, awaiting God, with my heart and mind fixed on Mary.”* [REDACTED]

Benedict XVI in his encyclical “Saved in Hope” writes:
*Life is like a voyage on the sea of history, often dark and stormy,
a voyage in which we watch for the stars that indicate the route.
The true stars of our life are the people who have lived good lives.
They are lights of hope.
Certainly, Jesus Christ is the true light,
the sun that has risen above all the shadows of history.
But to reach him we also need lights close by;
people who shine with his light and so guide us along our way.
Who more than Mary could be a star of hope for us?
So, we cry out to her:
“Star of the Sea, shine upon us and guide us on our way.”* [REDACTED]

...And now ‘for the rest of the story’,
as Paul Harvey, the radio announcer used to say.
In 1964, when I was thirteen years old,
our family moved to Annapolis, Maryland.
It was the seventh time we had moved in my thirteen years of living
and the last time.
I entered my eighth-grade year at the local public Junior High School.
On that first Sunday of August,
when we entered St. Mary’s Church in Annapolis,
I was pleasantly surprised.

There on the side altar, hung a large icon of Our Mother of Perpetual Help.
It was the first time I had ever seen the icon
 of Our Mother of Perpetual Help outside our home.
And suddenly that icon of Mary that had seemed so lifeless and dull,
 meant everything to me.
This common household fixture,
 this “light switch” I had taken for granted so many times,
 once again “turned on” the warmth,
 and made me feel so at home in this strange new town.
After this experience that day,
 I began to visit her shrine often in the church and to pray to her.

Now the Redemptorists ran the parish of St. Mary’s.
But I didn’t know who the Redemptorists were at the time,
 nor did I know the difference
 between religious and diocesan priests.
You see, I never went to Catholic school.
I’m CCD born and bred.
So, to me, a priest was priest. They were all the same.

Eight months after I first encountered OMPH in the church,
 in March of 1965,
 a young Redemptorist priest, Father Robert Lennon,
 came into my CCD class one Sunday morning.
He spoke to us about the priesthood.
He talked to us about a high school seminary run by the Redemptorists.
And then he asked if any boys were interested in being a priest?
I don’t remember if any of the other eighth grade boys
 in my CCD class raised their hand.
I know I didn’t... I wanted to... But I didn’t feel worthy.
I had failed to become an altar boy three times,
 because I couldn’t memorize the Latin.
I had been held back a year from receiving my Confirmation
 because I didn’t pass the test the first time.

I didn't know one had to study to be priest,
I always thought it was like a getting a job.
One day you just went and applied for a position in the Church.
You can see, why I judged myself to be so unworthy of such a call.
But at the end of class, as Father Lennon was walking down the hall,
something inside me urged me to speak to him.
So, I ran down the hall, and told him: "I'd like to be a priest."
We talked a little and then he promised to come and see me.

Just to show you how ignorant I was of what I was doing,
I went home that day and told my parents
I was thinking about going to a cemetery.
Two weeks after speaking with Father Lennon,
he and another Redemptorist, Fr. Mike Dillon, came to my house
to meet my family and speak to my parents.
As we sat in the living room, my mother began to cry.
She got up from the couch and disappeared.
When she returned she was carrying the picture of my uncle,
the one on the piano with him dressed in his army uniform.
She introduced him: "This is my brother. Do you know him?
He was killed in action on Okinawa in 1945.
His name was Father Lawrence Lynch.
He too was a Redemptorist priest."

They knew him well. They were seminarians when he was killed.
They were amazed by the connection.
At the time it happened, I thought it coincidental
that I was entering the very same order as my uncle
without ever knowing he was a Redemptorist
or who the Redemptorists were.
He had always been just Father Lawrence.
It would only be years later, after I was ordained a priest,
wearing my uncle's habit rosary and saying Mass with his chalice,

that I would look back
and suddenly recognize the mysterious unfolding of grace.
And I stand before you tonight as a witness to this truth:
I came to the altar of God, because of my uncle, who brought Mary,
Our Mother of Perpetual Help into our home. ██████████

Behold my mother.
She is a presence in my life wherever I go.
She is always my perpetual help.
She is an image at the foot of my bed,
 who is always the first person I see when I arise
 and the last person I say goodnight to.
She is a medal around my neck.
Unconsciously, out of habit, I touch the medal constantly.
Not for good luck, like a rabbit's foot, but for assurance, for comfort,
 just to be always aware of her presence.
And I carry her in my wallet and on the dashboard of my car.
She is always with me.
To borrow the words from a song in the musical, "My Fair Lady,"
 with a small adaptation for the occasion:
, *I've grown accustomed to her face.*
 Accustomed to her eyes.
 Accustomed to her grace.

Behold your mother too!
Take her into your home.
Welcome her into your heart.