

## Mary, Exemplar of the Church

Holy Saturday, 4/23/11

The *Liturgy of the Hours* refers to Mary as the “Exemplar of the Church.” There are at least two meanings to this title, and both arise clearly in the *Hail, Mary* prayer, when this prayer is understood allegorically.

The first approach to understanding is the interpretation from an individual perspective. Mary in the *Hail, Mary* prayer is a unique representation of the timeless, perfect presence of the Divinity which always has its place within each of us, and which is the inner structure and beauty and meaning which makes each of us inherently noble and valuable, regardless of—and in contrast to—the weaknesses and defects and peculiarities of our individual characters and personalities.

When we pray “Hail, Mary, full of grace,” we are recognizing Mary in her perfection, as completely full of the grace of God, transparent to it, and entirely willing to serve God’s will with her whole self, unreservedly.

This first phrase, then, articulates the perfect in each of us. We each have within us, as the fundamental component of our existence, the presence of the Source of All Things, the One who brings everything into existence and sustains all existence in his love—in short, the Divinity.

The statement, “The Lord is with you,” is a straightforward expression of this abiding presence of God within us. As I have written elsewhere, we are in fact nothing other than the creative energy of this God who brings all into existence in his loving heart. The Creator God is the root and wellspring of our existence. And the wellspring is his unending love.

So our very essence—the precious and uniquely valuable fundament of our being—is the presence of the Spirit of God within us. The Lord is with us in such a way that “we are all Gods,” as Jesus said, and also, “we are all God’s.”

And thus we share—all of us—this same fundament of our being. The same God lives within each of us, making us brothers and sisters in the fatherhood of God. This is the foundation of the second interpretation of the *Hail, Mary* prayer—the communal interpretation, which we will consider below.

The phrase, “The Lord is with you,” is also a Hebraic idiom which appears to mean, “You are acting in God’s will.” This is characteristic of the perfect individual person, as embodied in Mary, the mother of Jesus. The perfected self is “transparent” to the will of God, offers no resistance to it, and brings it about in the physical and spiritual worlds. That perfect part of us all is not only Holy in essence, but is also Holy in action—Holy in the events and circumstances of our lives. In our perfect selves, God is not only alive and present fully within us, but God is also made manifest in the world through us.

Thus it is that, like Mary our exemplar, each of us is blessed to be the “womb” through which God is brought alive into the world. This is true not only of “holy” people; it is true of

every human being. In some way, God springs forth from the heart of every human—God irresistibly manifests his presence in every human being—manifests the worth and value of each of his creatures as living sources of the richness of God’s love.

This is what one sees when one looks at another and sees beneath the “warts,” sees beneath the foibles of personality, beneath the dislikeability or even the positive repugnance of character of another. One sees the permanent, on-going, eternal, peaceful, loving Creator and Source of All in that heart, as in all of creation.

It is only that view of one another that can form the basis of the perfect community in God.

To see in this way is to see with the “eyes of God”—to be Holy. Thus, the phrase “holy Mary, mother of God” (that is, *theotokos*—“the one who brings God into the world”) involves that perfect part of ourselves which is the living, pure presence of the Silent, Perfect Being, who expresses/manifests himself through us. And the direction or intention of that expression or manifestation is to call to perfection—at least in the ideal—that which is imperfect in us, all that chooses self over God and others, all that is sinful.

Thus, recognizing that the stubborn sinful self is intractable and stone-hard, we pray that by the grace of God, it be brought to yield to the perfect one within us. This we cannot do by our own wills. We hope, nonetheless, for the Holy to express itself within us and through us, that the perfect may come at last to be expressed wholly and fully through us.

Personal perfection in holiness, which is the substance of the “individual interpretation” of the *Hail, Mary* prayer above, is of itself not the highest goal of the life given to Christ. Personal holiness is valuable not in itself but rather in that it provides the foundation for the perfect communal life, which is the Body of Christ brought to full stature. One can engage in the communal Christian life only to the extent that one is holy—that is, to the extent that one has given over oneself, one’s life, to the will of God, recognizing that the Father is King and Master of the universe of created things, that the Father is the source of the justice and loving kindness which founds the Body of Christ, the perfect Christian community of other-directed, self-sacrificing love.

It is this communal life of *agape* love which is the *telos*—the final destination—of creation and which Jesus came to teach, by word and example, in so many different ways. See John 17 (“Father, that they may be one as we are one”), the parable of the Prodigal Son, the story of the woman caught in adultery, the dinner party with Simon the Pharisee and the weeping woman. . . .

These understandings provide us with the basis for the communal interpretation of the *Hail, Mary* prayer. In this interpretation, Mary allegorically represents the Body of Christ, the perfect Christian community, given over fully to the life of love.

And so, when we pray, “Hail, Mary, full of grace, the Lord is with you,” we are recognizing—in this communal interpretation—the presence of the Holy Spirit of God within the community. For it is the Holy Spirit who inspires the community to goodness and who causes the power of virtue which infuses the community to be manifested in holy, loving actions in the

world. The presence of God among them is concretely realized as humble, loving service. The presence of God becomes grace-filled action among them.

This generous way of life, filled with every virtue of service and mutual respect *is* Jesus alive in our world. When we pray, “Blessed are you among women, and blessed is the fruit of your womb, Jesus,” we proclaim this way of life—God-led and God-graced—to be “blessed” among all possible ways of life. It is blessed because it is the conduit through which the loving goodness of God flows out into the world.

This is the center, the core, of the Gospel. God has instituted a way of living which is perfect. It is the way which recognizes the kingship of God in everything, and which seeks to discern and to bring into being the will of God. It is the way, then, of Jesus—the way which Jesus taught and which he modeled, especially on Calvary. It is the way of service and self-sacrificing love, the way of perfect humility. It is the Body of Christ acting in the world, living in peace which arises from justice and mutual respect, bringing into existence forgiveness, mercy, compassion, and encouragement. It is Emmanuel—God among us.

Such a community preaches the Gospel by living it out and manifesting its humble perfection in the world. Like Jesus himself, this way of life has two effects on the world—some find themselves drawn to it, and others scorn it and seek to take advantage of it. In either case, Christ lives in the world through the action of the community, and the community is thus “perfect as your heavenly Father is perfect.”

Thus the community—the transparent conduit of God’s action in the world—is “holy” and is the “mother of God” in the sense of the *theotokos*: the one who brings God into the world, both in prayer and Liturgy, and in works of the loving heart.

In the final petition of the *Hail, Mary* prayer, we call upon the Body of Christ to live out its mission as Communion of Saints by praying for the healing of us individual Christians who are “steeped in sin” that we might accept the grace of spiritual healing, that we sinners who “miss the mark” of spiritual perfection in our interactions with others and with the world might come finally to loving surrender of our wills to the will of God and take our place in the Body of Christ, humbly bringing Christ to be in the world.

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