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# His Mother



*Blessed art thou that hast believed!*

(Luke 1:45)

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TO ATTAIN A full understanding of a tree as it is, we must look into the earth where its roots are, from where the sap arises into the trunk, twig, blossoms, and fruit. Similarly, we shall do well to consider now that earth from which the personage of Our Lord arises—Mary, His mother.

We are told that she came of noble parentage, royal blood. Now every man is unique, created but once, with an identity belonging to him alone. And in that which is peculiarly his own, in what he is when he stands face to face with himself and God, the particular circumstances which produced him are of no

account. There is no why or wherefore here, "there is neither Jew nor Greek: there is neither bond nor free." Quite true. Yet in matters of great moment, and ultimately even in all the affairs of life, everything depends on whether a person is of noble quality or not; so it is here. In the simple generosity of Mary's answer to the Angel of the Annunciation, a most noble quality came to light, royal in character.

Something tremendous confronted her. What was being asked of her was nothing less than blind surrender into the hands of God. Precisely this surrender is what she gave, with a quiet greatness, wholly unselfconscious. A good part of this greatness of soul sprang from her nobleness of being, her sheer uncluttered stature.

And from this time forth her destiny was linked to her Child's: first by the bitterness that came between her and her betrothed; then by the journey to Bethlehem where she bore her child in surroundings of poverty and want; then the flight and exile to a foreign country—her way of life upset, full of danger, taken with such suddenness from the security she had always known—until it was safe to go home again.

When her Child was twelve years old and stayed behind in the Temple and she found Him again only after an anxious search (Lk 2:41ff), for the first time was revealed the divine mystery in which her life was caught up. Her seemingly well-founded reproach, "Son, why hast thou done so to us? Behold thy father and I have sought thee sorrowing!", was answered in a tone of astonishment (and the tone must have been

the most unnerving thing of all): "How is it that you sought me? Did you not know that I must be about my father's business?" Then indeed she must have had some inkling of what the future held for her. There must have been a foreknowledge that Simeon's prophecy would be fulfilled: "And thy own soul a sword shall pierce." For how could one interpret such a thing as a child answering his frightened mother in this situation by asking, with fullest confidence in the self-evident rightness of his position: "How is it that you sought me?" It is not surprising to read what follows: "And they understood not the word that he spoke unto them."

However we read directly after: "His mother kept these words in her heart." She could not "understand" the word that He spoke—she was not equal to the situation in the way of intellectual comprehension—but she was indeed equal to it in the way of being a person of enough gravity to take it in, like the good soil that takes into itself a rare and precious seed which then begins to grow there.

Then follow eighteen years of tranquility. The Holy Gospel tells us nothing further about them. But when the ear is properly tuned for it, this silence of the Gospels speaks with a great voice. Eighteen years of silence going by "in her heart." We are told no more than that the Child "was subject to them," "advanced in wisdom and age and grace with God and men." Tranquil, profound surroundings, ever in the presence of the love of this holiest of all mothers.

Then He went forth from His home and into His mission, His destiny. But she was still with Him: at the beginning, at the marriage-feast of Cana, where a last remnant of maternal protectiveness and correction can still be seen. . . . Another time when some sort of disturbing news must have found its way to Nazareth (Mk 3:31ff), she bestirred herself to look Him up, stood there waiting at the door. . . . Again she was with Him at the last days, and stood under the cross.

The entire life of Jesus is surrounded by the deep significance of having His mother close by. The strongest message of all comes out of her silence.

One word may give us some indication of how profound the affinity was between the Lord and His mother. He is standing in the midst of the people, teaching them (Lk 11:27), when suddenly a woman's voice speaks out: "Blessed is the womb that bore thee, the breast which thou hast sucked!" And Jesus answers, "Shall we not say, Blessed are those who hear the word of God, and keep it?" It is as though all at once He has been drawn away from the noise and hubbub of the crowd, as though a bell has sounded deep in this soul . . . and He is in Nazareth with His Mother.

Elsewhere, however, if we listen to the words that Jesus speaks to His mother and simply let them make their impression upon us just as they arise out of the situation, then every time it is as though a gulf opens up between Him and her.

That time in Jerusalem—when He was still a child, and without a word to her had stayed behind,

when all the city was in a state of unrest and He could have been injured, not simply by accident but by foul play—surely then she had the right to ask Him why He had acted as He did? But He answers her with astonishment: “How is it that you sought me?” And as we wait for a further word of explanation, some bridging of the gulf, we read only this: “And they understood not the word that He spoke unto them.”

He attends the wedding-feast at Cana in Galilee (Jn 2). The family are obviously people of modest means, who have little in the way of worldly possessions. The wine gives out, and everyone senses the mounting embarrassment. Mary comes to Him, beseeching: “They have no wine left.” How does He reply? “Nay, woman, why dost thou trouble me with that? My time has not come yet.” What does that mean other than this: my concern is to do the will of My Father, as He shows it to me moment by moment—that is my time. With that you have nothing to do. . . . To be sure, a little later, He does help her. But that is because His time *has* come, not because she beseeched Him.

She comes down from Galilee seeking Him, perhaps again “sorrowing”; but he is busy inside a house teaching (Mk 4). They tell Him: “Behold your mother and thy brethren are without, looking for thee.” He asks: “Who is a mother, who are brethren, to me?” And He looks at the people sitting in a circle around Him and says: “Here are my mother and my brethren! If anyone does the will of God, he is my brother, and sister, and mother.” And, though surely He did go out and greet her lovingly, yet the words that He

had spoken still lay between them. Right here, feeling the shattering effect of His rebuke, spoken with such sternness, we become aware of the infinite distance out of which He comes, and the depth of the gulf which lies between Him and her. Yes, the very incident which shows their closeness to each other also shows the distance between them. "Blessed is the womb that bore thee, the breast which thou hast sucked!" . . . No! "Shall we not say, Blessed are those who hear the word of God, and keep it?"

And the last time, when He was on the cross, with the end near, while His mother stood below, yet not the less grappled to Him in all the torment of her heart, hanging, waiting on a word from Him—He said to her, with John in mind: "Woman, behold thy son!" And to the beloved disciple: "Behold thy mother!" (Jn 19:26) Surely, that must have been troubling. But in her heart she must have sensed the meaning of that other sentence: "Woman, behold thy son!" He was telling her to be quit of Him. He was now wholly engaged in that "hour" which had "come," great and terrible and demanding everything. In the ultimate, solitary presence of God, with the sins of the world laid upon Him, before God's Justice, there He was indeed quite alone.

Mary stood ever by His side. All that befell Him she shared. Indeed His life was her life. But not in the sense of intellectual understanding: "The Holy Spirit"—how full of meaning is that word *the* in the message of the Angel of the Annunciation (Lk 1:35), how pregnant with the mystery and remoteness of God!—the Holy Spirit came upon her "from on high,"