



INTRODUCTION

Openness to the Holy Spirit

When I was a child, Mary was only mentioned during Advent—although we didn’t call it Advent during the years my dad was a Wesleyan (Protestant) minister. In all those years, Mary existed primarily in the context of the Christmas play the children put on every year—a local version of *The Best Christmas Pageant Ever*. All the girls wanted to be Mary—from the preacher’s daughter (me) to the daughter of the guy who worked in Waterloo at the John Deere factory to the daughter of the farmer

who kept my family supplied with fresh milk and eggs year-round.

Mary came to me in bits and pieces in those years before I entered the Catholic Church. She was there next to the donkey with the broken ear in the Nativity set: a girl dressed in blue in the Christmas pageant. During my college days, I saw her as the subject of a Michelangelo sculpture or a painting by Titian, Rubens, or Raphael.

I don't remember when I heard the word *Visitation* for the first time. It was probably when I became Catholic and began praying the Joyful Mysteries. Before that, I didn't really know Mary. I didn't realize we can know her as we can know our daughter, our sister, or our very self. When we meet Mary in the Gospels, she is all of these things: a daughter, a cousin, a young woman discerning a call from God and her own response to that call.

To know Mary, we must be able to imagine Mary's inner monologue after the Annunciation when an angel tells her she will bring Jesus into the world. We need to begin to hear Mary speak, to sense what she was feeling, to understand her growing desire: *I must go. I must tell someone. I must see my cousin Elizabeth.*

As we journey with Mary, we get a sense of her mind working as she ponders the angel's words, as the Magnificat—a prayer, a revelation—is imprinted on her soul and pours forth when she reaches Elizabeth and Zechariah's doorstep, words familiar to us: *My soul proclaims the greatness of the Lord!*

We learn to listen to Mary as Elizabeth did, and we learn to embrace Mary as Elizabeth did. Why is this so important? Because Mary is God's game changer, his

pièce de résistance. Mary whispers to us, *Come and learn from me. Watch me. Feel what I feel. Desire what I desire. Risk everything as I risk everything. Share Jesus Christ as if it's what you were born to do—because it is what you were born to do.*

In the deepest part of the Christian soul, we know this. We know that we are tied to the hills of Judea where Mary encountered Elizabeth. The hills of Judea became God's first mission field; Mary, the first missionary; the Visitation, the blueprint for sharing the Gospel message.

There is a miraculous dimension to what transpired between these two women—and to all encounters that are made possible by the power of the Holy Spirit. The relationships themselves are pregnant with grace. They have the potential to bear Christ to the world today.

Which specific gifts of grace were present at the Visitation? And if we welcome God into our relationships as Mary and Elizabeth did, will we have access to these same gifts?

The answer is yes. We will realize that every gift we have been given in the natural order is really a gift from God. We will also receive gifts in a superabundant way—gifts of grace that go beyond what we have been given by way of our DNA. But there is even more to it than that. The Visitation gives us a glimpse into what it means to activate those gifts in such a way that *we give birth to Christ* in the world today. Pause there for a minute, and consider the words you just read. If we invite God to be in our midst, if we are open to receiving the gifts that were present at the Visitation, we can bring Christ to our world and to those we encounter each and every day.

Quite simply, the Visitation is the key to sharing Christ with the world right now, in our families, places of employment, schools, communities, and parishes. If we open our hearts fully to God's presence, if we are willing to say yes to him completely, if we are ready to embrace the nine gifts described in the chapters of this book—the very gifts which Mary and Elizabeth embraced—then we will also share Christ with the world. Christ will come to us and be born anew in our own circle of influence. In his General Audience on November 6, 2013, Pope Francis used the phrase “a communion of charisms” and explained that charisms are gifts or particular graces that are given to some for the good of many.¹ A communion of gifts (or charisms) is an excellent description of what was shared at the Visitation. And the gifts present at the Visitation are meant for us as well. They are meant for our good and for the good of those we encounter.

In the book *Mary, the Church at the Source*, Pope Benedict XVI writes, “Only a conversion to the sign of the woman, to the feminine dimension of the Church, rightly understood, will bring about the new opening to the creative power of the Spirit, and so to Christ's taking form in us, whose presence alone can give history a center and a hope.”²

This prophetic word is not just for women. It is an invitation to each of us to enter into that feminine dimension of the Church. To do that “rightly” as Pope Benedict describes, we will need a perfect model to emulate. And for that, we have only to sit at the feet of Mary and Elizabeth and learn from them.

Here, we see two women with one goal. They simply wanted to bear Christ to the world. St. Maximilian Kolbe understood this goal. He founded the Militia Immaculata and boldly proclaimed that their mission “was nothing less than to bring the whole world to God through Christ under the generalship of the Immaculate Conception, and to do so as quickly as possible.”³

We are being sent into the world to bring Christ to those we meet, and our success depends upon the degree to which we permit Mary’s example to challenge us. When we first meet Mary and Elizabeth in the Gospels, they are in the middle of improbable and overwhelming situations. They could have looked at their circumstances and decided they couldn’t be bothered with anyone else’s needs—spiritual or physical. Had they been shortsighted, concerned only with their own lives, families, and pregnancies, they would have missed the purpose of their call. Here is the paradox: their improbable situations uniquely *suit*ed them for the work before them. Incredibly, God chooses to show up in our improbable moments, transforming even the messiest and most tragic life event into a divine visitation.

All of us are given improbable situations, and each one provides a frame for our acceptance of and entrance into the gifts that might arise as a result of our openness to our “visitations.” For me, that acceptance and entrance began in 2003, when my father passed away. For a while, I was so consumed by grief that my grief almost eclipsed God’s larger purpose.

In those early weeks after his death, I began searching for answers to my questions about suffering, and I started that search by delving into the boxes of books I

had inherited from my father's personal library. In the bottom of one box, I found a copy of St. Augustine's *Confessions*. Augustine said the happy man is the man who seeks the Lord. As I read those words, I became open to whatever God wanted to show me, give me, or even take *from* me.

It was a time of grace. I did not realize that my openness to the gift of grace would enable me to become a Christ-bearer. Honestly, I didn't even know I was called to this mission, and I had a very limited understanding of the word *grace*.

About two years before my father died, we chatted over lunch, and he began talking about death and eternity. His candor that day emboldened me, and I asked him a question that I had wanted to ask for many months. "Dad, do you remember Elijah and Elisha? I feel as if we are connected like that, and I was wondering, inasmuch as you are able to do it, would you leave me the 'double portion' like Elijah left for Elisha?" I wasn't even sure what I meant by that. All I knew was that I hoped to be given that double portion.

Later, I would read St. Louis de Montfort's *True Devotion to the Blessed Virgin* and begin to understand the meaning of the words "double portion." This saint helped me to connect the dots between Mary, a path to holiness, and the double portion. "All [Mary's] domestics, that is, all her servants and slaves, are clothed with the double garments, her own and those of her Son."⁴

This is the double portion I had asked to receive without realizing what I was asking my Protestant preacher-father to send me. Dad's reply was immediate,

though he had no more idea what I meant than I did. He said yes.

On a Sunday in December 2003, my father passed away unexpectedly from a pulmonary embolism. This was it. This was the life event that would throw open the doors to a divine visitation. That season of grief became my hills of Judea, a place where God would visit me and make all things new.

Within weeks, I discovered *Dark Night of the Soul* by St. John of the Cross. The book helped me process the theology of suffering. By the time I finished reading that book, I knew the author I wanted to read next. If St. John of the Cross could help me sort through things that had happened to Dad, then maybe his spiritual companion would have something for me. I went in search of a book by St. Teresa of Avila. I remember the day that I was sitting up in bed reading her book *The Interior Castle*. I put the book down on the bed and stared at it. Everything in me said, "I want what she had—what both she and St. John of the Cross had."

Then the realization washed over me: *To have what they had, I would have to become part of the same faith that gave birth to that kind of holiness.* I had to become Catholic.

These two Carmelite saints, who had lived five hundred years ago, shared their own visitation experience with me. They had somehow visited me through their writings, calling me to come and follow. Through them, God was *visiting me*.

As Mary was drawn to travel to the hill country of Judea, I felt drawn to the Carmelites. But I did not know where to begin. Mary knew how to get to Elizabeth's house, but how did one find Carmelite saints who lived

five centuries ago? One could not simply travel through time to a small village in Avila, Spain, and have a chat with the saints. Yet I had so many questions about how to begin the journey of conversion to the Catholic faith shared by these saints and where it all might end.

In July of that year, on the Solemnity of Our Lady of Mount Carmel, I saw a woman by the name of Mary Elizabeth Kremksi on EWTN's *The Journey Home* program. (For those who are prone to see the hand of God in all things, note the name of the woman: Mary Elizabeth.) I was not in the habit of watching Catholic programs. I had simply been changing channels at random. I stopped immediately when I saw the name of the guest, because the words written next to her name said that she was a Third Order Carmelite. I jotted a set of questions down and mailed a letter to the show, and they forwarded it to her. A beautiful letter arrived in August 2004 from Mary Beth. The next month I began RCIA class, with Mary Beth as my spiritual mentor.

I was right where I needed to be in order to experience every gift of grace God wanted to pour out upon me. It all depended on one prerequisite, a kind of predisposition. Both Mary Beth and I had to bring an openness to the journey, a readiness for anything, in order to embrace whatever God had in mind for us. We had to be all-in, holding nothing back, offering him a total gift of self. The foundation for every gift of the Visitation is a spirit of openness to God's divine will.

To know how to do this, to fully understand what it means to have an openness to the Holy Spirit that makes us ready for a divine visitation, we can look to the women who exercised the gifts that were given in

the first Christ-centered friendship of all time. Mary and Elizabeth became the quintessential model of women who understood their dignity in the eyes of God and embraced the roles God had given them to share Christ with the entire world.

Like Mary, we are called to hold nothing back, to be ready to give God a *total* gift of self no matter what situation we may find ourselves in—whether we’re pregnant or we’ve just buried a parent, whether we are in a happy marriage or our marriage is falling apart, whether we are starting college next month or preparing to retire. Man or woman, each of us is called to say the prayer, “God, I’m yours. Use what you can. Lead where you will.”

Mary and Elizabeth’s witness is meant for us in this moment of time. Like them, we are to become Christ-bearers.

Mary’s openness to God’s plan unleashed nine gifts that ushered in the birth and ministry of God’s Son: spontaneity, courage, joy, readiness, humility, adventure, hospitality, wonder and awe, and thanksgiving. These are the gifts we see in action in those early days of the Gospel story. By activating these gifts in our own lives, Jesus Christ will be born anew in the lives of those around us. And it all begins with an openness to God’s plan. So, even if you are in the middle of your own chaotic or cataclysmic life event, it is time to simply say, “I’m ready. I’m ready for whatever God wants to show me, give me, or even take from me. I am wholly at his disposal, and I am ready to give birth to Jesus Christ in my corner of the world.”



CHAPTER ONE

A Spirit of Spontaneity

In May 2014, I traveled to Israel and prayed at the Basilica of the Annunciation in Nazareth. This beautiful church is built over the dwelling where Mary lived. Like the homes of other families of Nazareth, Mary's home would have been very simple, perhaps with only one or two rooms—hardly more than a cave in appearance, with an outdoor gathering space just beyond the front door. Somewhere on the right side and in the top third of that door, there would have been a mezuzah attached to the door frame. When I was in Israel, I noticed that there is a mezuzah affixed to the door frame of every Jewish home and hotel room to this day.

The mezuzah is a piece of wood, metal, or stone containing a parchment scroll with the Shema (passages from Deuteronomy) handwritten on one side and the name *Shaddai* (meaning “mighty and all-powerful One”) written on the back. All Hebrew people were familiar with the Shema:

Hear, O Israel, the Lord is our God, the Lord is one. You shall love the Lord, your God, with all your heart, with all your soul, and with all your resources. And these things that I command you today shall be upon your heart. And you shall teach them to your children, and you shall speak of them when you sit in your house and when you go on the way, when you lie down and when you rise up. And you shall bind them as a sign upon your arm and they shall be an ornament between your eyes. And you shall write them upon the doorposts of your house and on your gates. (Dt 6:4–9)

These verses would have been watchwords for Mary. She would have recited them and lived by them. They would have formed her, and the Lord would have surely used these verses to prepare Mary for the moment for which all of Israel had waited—the moment when she was given the choice to say yes to God’s plan for her to become the Mother of the Messiah.

These words would have prepared her to have a spirit of spontaneity because they directed her heart and mind toward total devotion to the Lord. They would have formed her to give an immediate assent regardless of the manner in which God asked her to serve him. This spirit of spontaneity is the first gift we will explore

in our journey to the Visitation, and the Shema is the pathway to this gift.

If you are a person who loves God “with all your heart, with all your soul, and with all your resources”—as the Shema instructs—you will be a person who is ready with an immediate yes when God calls. The gift we receive through recitation of the Shema is the gift of spontaneity—a heart after God’s own heart, a will conformed to his will, and hands and feet willing to serve.

As we look to the example of Mary, we realize that we are being called to read the words of the Shema and embody them, letting them draw forth a spirit of spontaneous cooperation in our hearts as well. Go back to that text and read the words carefully and prayerfully. If you wish to pray a novena as you read these nine chapters, you can find a novena and the Shema at the end of the book (see appendix). The novena will assist you in praying with Mary for a greater outpouring of these gifts. Each chapter will end with a prayer, which can either conclude the chapter’s reflection or serve as a beginning to the day’s novena. The chapters and the novena will help you to step into Mary’s world and begin to think as she thinks, love as she loves, and share Christ as she shared him with the world.

But who is this young woman from Nazareth? Who is the maiden that lived by the Shema? How can we begin to see her with our mind’s eye? To know her heart? To feel what she felt? The Song of Songs (Song of Solomon) offers us a good place to begin. These lines from the Old Testament speak prophetically of Mary:

A garden enclosed, my sister, my bride,
a garden enclosed, a fountain sealed!

A garden fountain, a well of living water,
streams flowing from Lebanon. (Sg 4:12, 15)

Mary is that enclosed garden, which no man has ever touched. She is the Ark of the New Covenant, the Daughter of Zion, the sister of all Hebrew people. She is the bride which the Spirit of the Lord overshadows. She is the fountain where water is first sanctified and made holy by the power of the Holy Spirit. She is the New Eve. And it is to this woman that the angel appears.

We know from Luke's gospel that the angel approached Mary with great respect, saying, "Hail favored one" (Lk 1:28). For a moment, Mary was concerned. What did this greeting mean? The angel set her at ease, assuring her that all was well. "Do not be afraid, Mary, for you have found favor with God. Behold, you will conceive in your womb and bear a son, and you shall name him Jesus. He will be great and will be called Son of the Most High, and the Lord God will give him the throne of the house of Jacob forever, and of his kingdom there will be no end" (Lk 1:30–33).

While most young women would fixate on the promise that her son would be a king, that the Most High would give that son dominion over the entire world, and that this kingdom would never end, Mary does not focus on the glory that would come by way of her Son. Instead, she considers her call to holiness—and that is all.

How can this be, she asks the angel, if she is to remain pure, chaste, a woman who has never known a man? Holiness is her only concern. "The Holy Spirit will come upon you," the angel responds, "and the power of the Most High will overshadow you. Therefore the

child to be born will be called holy, the Son of God. And behold, Elizabeth, your relative, has also conceived a son in her old age, and this is the sixth month for her who was called barren; for nothing will be impossible for God" (Lk 1:35–37).

And here is the moment of truth: Will she respond with a spirit of spontaneous assent? Will she activate the gift of spontaneous cooperation that has been cultivated by the words of the Shema and protected by a life dedicated to God? The whole world waits. What will this young woman of thirteen or fourteen years say?

Would she worry about the ramifications of her response? Would she ask for a little time to consider the possible fallout before accepting God's offer—ramifications such as getting stoned to death by a community that would not understand? Would she mention Joseph, perhaps ask Archangel Gabriel to give Joseph a prophetic word or two to ease things along before having to break the news to him? And while the angel was at it, could the angel find a way for her parents to be there for the little angelic visit so as to prepare them as well?

Would Mary tell the angel that she wanted to do the will of God but that she felt conflicted? If the angel could get all of Nazareth behind it, maybe then it would make sense. Maybe *that* would be the sign that she should say yes. Sure, God had sent an angel to her, but he couldn't have thought that would be enough to raise the scandalous to the miraculous in the minds of family and friends.

Are these the things Mary pondered? No. Mary voiced none of these fears, though she certainly had reason to fear. Instead, Mary responded freely and spontaneously, with a faith and acceptance of divine will