

Mary, Mother of the Church

Why Catholic?

Journey through the catechism

Mary is called “Mother of the Church” because of her complete receptivity and adherence to God’s will, Jesus’ redemptive work, and to every prompting of the Holy Spirit. She is the church’s model of faith and charity. But who was this woman, really?

She was a real woman, born in Nazareth, a poor town — so poor in the first century, that archeologists did not find mosaics or inscriptions. Mary probably grew up as an illiterate peasant in a 1-2 room house surrounded by similar houses. According to Sister Elizabeth Johnson, in her book “Truly Our Sister,” Mary and Joseph were devout Jews, for Jesus’ knowledge of the Torah was great, implying strongly that Mary and Joseph were people of deep faith who knew how to trust God in the midst of a world plagued by the violence of the Roman occupiers.

We know that she was a child herself when the angel came and her belly was filled with mystery. But who she was, deep in her heart, is lost now as is her husband’s character – the two of them long ago turned to symbol and legend. However, when we return to the Gospels, we may gain some insight into this young Jewish girl, who, in turn, may help us gain insight into ourselves.

In reading Luke’s account of the Annunciation, Mary’s response is, “How can this be?”

How many times have we said the same thing? What are the fears we find within ourselves that keep us paralyzed or immobile?

When Mary bursts into the great hymn of praise, the Magnificat, how many times have we said, “The One who is mighty has done great things for me?” What does receiving mercy from someone or from God enable us to do?

How many times have we experienced “God showing the strength of God’s arm?” When have we received strength from God or others and when have we been that strength for someone else? When have we experienced “God filling the hungry with good things?” What is it that may be coming to birth in us?

Imagine spending some time in her presence, she whom God has given us as a model of prayer and discipleship. Mary might tell us how she felt about the Angel's message.

Surely she was frightened and troubled, but she cries out "My spirit rejoices in God my Savior; The Mighty One has done great things for me and Holy is God's name." She didn't mind the poverty, or being unknown, or spending her days doing very ordinary things. Her joy was deep and abiding and it would carry her through all the heartaches that lay ahead of her—even to the foot of the cross.

Clearly, Mary did not feel superior or arrogant about God's favor. Instead, her Magnificat is a prayer for social justice, "God has dispersed the arrogant of mind and heart — God has lifted up the lowly — God has filled the hungry with good things, but the rich God has sent away empty." Mary's words are the preview of her Son's coming. It is Jesus who later turns the acceptable social norms upside down with the preference for the poor and the hungry, the helpless and the deprived. It is Jesus who teaches that God's love is all-inclusive and unconditional.

Luke's Gospel tells us that Mary went to see her cousin, Elizabeth. It is possible that this was not an ordinary visit. Mary may have been fleeing the wrath of townspeople. In Judea, to be pregnant and unmarried was a crime punishable by death. This cultural understanding gives a much deeper meaning to the report that Mary "went with haste into a hill country." Perhaps terrified, Mary seeks out comfort and advice from her older cousin, who is herself pregnant. Both women are on the fringe of society. The encounter between them is so intense that the spark of life leaps within them. This is a story of faith overcoming deadly fear. The encounter between Mary and Elizabeth reaffirms the importance of mutual support and community among human beings, both of which enable us to continue bearing life into our world.

So what do we know of Mary, the mother of the church? Brian Doyle gives us an eloquent answer, "She bore that child and loved him dearly, and the wonder-weave of her patience comes untorn through the years. So it is that when we think of the holiness of women and mothers, we think of her, smiling against loss and horror and death, and against those savage inevitable wounds we so often whisper not to him but to her, and isn't that odd and wonderful that so often so many so desperately dream of a calm Jewish girl whose whole life was a river of yes?"

The fifth topic of the six-week spring session of Why Catholic? is “Mary, Mother of the Church.” Next week, Monsignor Robert Jaskot will write about the sixth topic, “We Believe in Everlasting Life.”