

Reflection for July

Theme: **Mary and the Magnificat**

Scripture Reference: Luke 1:46-55

And Mary said,
“My soul magnifies the Lord,
and my spirit rejoices in God my Saviour.....

to Abraham and to his descendants forever.

“the honour to be your mother”

In the 15th and 16th centuries, the native people of Mexico suffered conquests, first by the Aztecs and later by the Spanish Conquistadors.

It was the custom of the Aztecs to harvest the conquered people as victims for human sacrifice to the snake god Quetzalcóatl. According to the Aztecs own account, it cost them a quarter of a million human lives per year.

They lived in natural and supernatural terror, yet the fear of their idols kept them trapped in idolatry. They refused to accept the Christian faith despite the best efforts of missionaries.

In 1531, the Blessed Virgin Mary appeared in Mexico City to a peasant man named Juan Diego. He was a simple man in his fifties, a convert to the Catholic faith and he was on his way to Mass when Our Lady appeared. She asked him to go to the Bishop and request that a church be built in her honour on that very spot at Tepeyac. Now the Bishop was skeptical and asked Juan Diego to provide a sign that the vision was authentic. When Juan Diego next saw our Lady, she filled his overcoat with roses even though it was winter and it was not the season for roses. When the Bishop took the roses from Juan Diego's rough garment, the men saw that Mary had miraculously left her image on the fabric. Juan Diego's overcoat was made of cactus fiber so the relic shouldn't have lasted 50 years. In fact, after 5 years it should have started falling apart. Yet it has lasted half a millennium! And today the image still looks with eyes of mercy upon hundreds of thousands of pilgrims.

What happened at the wake of Juan Diego's visitation? Well, the Bishop of Tepeyac built that church of course and soon 9 million native American people embraced the Christian faith.

*Soon, the entire continent converted to Catholicism. Where the missionaries and militaries had failed, a poor man succeeded with the assistance of his Blessed Mother. Mary had told Juan Diego, **“Am I not here? I, who, have the honour to be your mother. Are you not in my shadow and my protection? Are you not in the hollow of my mantle? In the crossing of my hands? Do you need anything more?”***

Do we need anything more?

As told by Matthew Leonard

The story behind the visitations of Our Lady of Guadalupe is as hopeful as it is inspiring. That our Mother can do so much through one common man is perhaps not surprising but the fact that she considers it an *honour* to be our Mother certainly may come as a surprise. How

can it be *her* honour to be *our* Mother? Shouldn't it be the other way round? Perhaps there may be a few ways to understand this honour that Mary talks about.

For one, it is an honour because she, a lowly "servant" will be called "blessed" by "all generations". It is an honour because she, in becoming the Mother of God, is also the new Eve who births a new creation. So, this honour stems not so much from anything we have done as much as it stems from God bestowing this honour on Mary "for the Mighty One has done great things for me".

Yet, why is it that Mary has been given this honour? Was she randomly selected in a lucky draw? Was it simply because she was a good girl who led a good life?

Mary is graced with honour because everything that happened in her life was hinged on her Yes to God! Of course, if we fool ourselves into thinking it was just one Yes- we would be sadly mistaken. Every great act of faith on our part is but a fruit of being faithful in little things. Mary may have said many a Yes's before the *Fiat* we laud her for. There may have been many daily, silent, unsung Yes's that prepared her to say that one great Yes.

If that is true, then Juan Diego too may have lived a life of Yes's to God before he receives the honour of a visitation, the honour of being the saint whose obedience to Mary caused a continent to turn to God, the honour of Mary being his Mother.

In God's worldview, there is nothing little or undeserving of attention, there will never be an unsung hero in God's kingdom. Our little acts of obedience make us ready for the greater ones, for the honour that God is waiting to bestow.

As we meditate upon the honour due to the 'handmaid of the Lord', it is only befitting that we reflect upon the hymn that Mary sang, the hymn that many a hungry, lowly, servant has whispered down the generations trusting in the God who *fills*, who *lifts*, who *saves*.

"My soul magnifies"

While 'magnify' is rightly translated as proclaim, perhaps there is more to this word from where this canticle receives its name- the *Magnificat*.

The modern usage of magnify means to make (something) appear larger than it is. Does that mean we need to make God appear larger than He is? Surely there is nothing we need to do to make the Creator of the universe any bigger than He already is.

But Mary says her *soul* magnifies the Lord- What could that mean?

Sometimes we tend to make God in our own little image and our own petty likeness- sometimes, we believe in a very small, incapable, ill-equipped god who can do only what *we* think possible for *us* to do in the situation. When doctors say there is little hope, we tend to believe them despite our prayers, when teachers tell us a child has no hope, we trust them more than the God for whom nothing is impossible. But our belief in this small god is limited not only to the times when we need to see God's power, but in other aspects too.

We believe in a punitive god who is exacting, and so we struggle to forgive ourselves and others, we believe in a god who isn't rich in abundance and so we struggle to share of what we have, in the fear of losing the 'little' we have, we have forgotten God is rich in mercy and

compassion and that's why it's easy to look the other way when a stranger on the street asks for alms.

Our souls have begun to believe in a very small god- it is time for our souls like the soul of Mary to *magnify* him and make him larger, not larger than what He is, but larger than what we have begun to perceive Him.

How big is your God? Have we, at times, lost sight of the large-ness of God? Have we failed to magnify him in our lives, in our communities? Do we act out of a heart of abundance or penury?

“all generations will call me blessed”

This is anything but bashful or proud. It is Mary's sincere response to the extraordinary greeting of Elizabeth who reminds her “most blessed are you among women, and blessed is the fruit of your womb” (Lk 1:42) and then again “Blessed are you who believed <https://bible.usccb.org/bible/luke/1-50001045-1> that what was spoken to you by the Lord would be fulfilled.” (Lk 1:45)
Mary is blessed because she *believed*.

Interestingly, Elizabeth's greeting is reminiscent of Deborah's song after Israel's victory against Jabin, the king of Canaan when Sisera, the commander of his army was killed by Jael, a simple “tent-dwelling woman”. Deborah sings “most blessed of women be Jael” (Judges 5:24). It is also reminiscent of Uzziah praising Judith for killing Holofernes by cutting off his head- “O daughter, you are blessed by the Most High God above all other women on earth; and blessed be the Lord God, who created the heavens and the earth, who has guided you to cut off the head of the leader of our enemies”. (Judith 13:18)

Apologist Joe Heschmeyer while reflecting on the lines – “blessed are you among women” says that Satan would have had great cause to worry when he heard these lines. He goes back to the punishment that the serpent receives after the fall- “I will put enmity between you and the woman, and between your seed and her seed; he shall bruise your head, and you shall bruise his heel” (Gen. 3:15). “At this point,” Heschmeyer points out, “Satan was probably on the lookout of a woman whose child would crush his head.”

When Jael and Judith, both “blessed among women” crush the head of their enemies “one almost wonders if God was mocking Satan by raising righteous women up to crush the heads of Israel's enemies as a none-too-subtle reminder of what was coming for Satan himself.”

“scattered the proud... brought down the powerful... sent the rich away empty.”

If we see Mary's Magnificat simply as a sweet sounding, melodious hymn, we are not seeing the entire picture. Mary's Magnificat as has been noted time and again by various theologians, Catholic and others alike, is ‘revolutionary’!

William Barclay, an English theologian, says that the Magnificat is "a bombshell." He went on to say that people have read it so often that they have forgotten its "revolutionary terror." It takes "the standards of the world and turns them upside down." He believes the Magnificat encompasses three revolutions: "an economic revolution; a political revolution; and a moral revolution."

Perhaps it was this “revolution” that countries were afraid of when they banned the Magnificat. During the British rule of India, the Magnificat was prohibited from being sung in church. In the 1980s, Guatemala’s government discovered Mary’s words about God’s preferential love for the poor to be too dangerous and revolutionary. The song had been creating quite the stirring amongst Guatemala’s impoverished masses. Mary’s words were inspiring the Guatemalan poor to believe that change was indeed possible. Thus their government banned any public recitation of Mary’s words. Similarly, after the Mothers of the Plaza de Mayo—whose children all disappeared during the Dirty War—placed the Magnificat’s words on posters throughout the capital plaza, the military junta of Argentina outlawed any public display of Mary’s song.

“to his descendants forever”

Perhaps “filled with good things” is not something we desperately pray for, because we have never known real hunger. Even when we fast, we starve ourselves knowing there will be food in our bellies once the fast is broken. It is a matter of choice that we skip a meal and hence we might never know what hunger really is. However, in a country like ours, we will always have neighbours (not necessarily the ones living next door, but the ones on our street) who are desperate to be filled, who are desperate for the Magnificat.

It is good to ask ourselves and our communities from time to time, which side of the revolution are we on? In our institutions, would we dare to send the rich away empty or is it usually the poor who get sent away empty? Do we dare to question those who misuse their power or do we befriend them in the hope that they will help us someday? Do we align ourselves with the haves or the have-nots? Sure, a revolution is challenging, it disturbs our comfort, it may even scare us, but perhaps it is time to “magnify” God- to make him bigger in our hopes and plans to see this revolution come about.

Questions for Reflection

- What does the idea of Mary being honoured to be our Mother mean to us? Do we believe it?
- How big has our image of God been till now?
- What does the idea of the Magnificat being a revolution mean to us?