

THE PRESENTATION OF MARY IN THE TEMPLE

The Earthly Sanctuary

Mary's Humility

The Presentation of Mary in the Temple – November 21st

November 21, 2020

GOSPEL: Luke 10:38-42, 11:27-28

EPISTLE: Hebrews 9:1-11

INTRODUCTION

The primary importance of the Virgin Mary to the Church is the Incarnation. Because of this, the Virgin Mary is usually portrayed in iconography as holding her young Son. The message proclaimed by the icon is that God has come in the flesh, and here is proof: His mother holding her Son. This study seeks to introduce aspects of the life of the Virgin Mary that are not very commonly known from an historical viewpoint. The significance of some of the events in the life of the Virgin Mary including her place among the saints in glory is covered quite well in The Life of the Virgin Mary by the Holy Apostles Convent, which is recommended for further reading.

One can divide up the life of the Virgin Mary into four parts, each of which produced major changes in her life. These four periods of her life are covered in this study as follows:

	DATES	PERIOD	FEAST DAY
Part I	20 BC to 5 BC	Birth to Annunciation	Nativity of Mary; Presentation of Mary in the Temple
Part II	5 BC to 1 BC	Annunciation to Infancy of Jesus	Annunciation
Part III	1 BC to 30 AD	Jesus' Life & Ministry	See Appendix B
Part IV	30 AD to 55 AD	Pentecost to Her Death	Dormition of Mary

Parts I and IV use historical writings as their primary source with Scriptural references woven in where appropriate. Parts II and III use Scriptural references as a primary source and supplement this with historical writings for clarification.

Figure I is a family tree of the Lord Jesus in the Flesh. This was pieced together primarily from the Prologue from Ochrid which is a collection of brief accounts of the lives of the saints that originated in the Macedonian churches in the 1st Century and that has been added to over the years. Butler's Lives of the Saints is a similar work that came from the Church of Rome and that was started by Clement of Rome also in the 1st Century. The goal of both References 2 and 3 is

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that future generations might not forget the price that was paid by their forefathers in establishing the Faith.

Figure I will be referred to from time to time to aid in understanding events in the life of the Virgin Mary. In each of the four parts, when historical references are used, only the most commonly available ones will be used in cases where many refer to the same events.

Mary's Parents

The Virgin Mary's father, Joachim, was from the tribe of Judah, was a native of Nazareth, and was a descendant of King David. Mary's mother, Anna (Hebrew: *Hannah*) was a daughter of Matthan the priest (Figure 1) and was a descendant of Aaron the High Priest. According to First Century writings, Joachim was a shepherd by occupation and was very wealthy from owning large herds of sheep. In humbleness of heart, Joachim had the practice of offering more than the Mosaic Law required. One third of his income he gave to the Temple as his tithe, one third he gave to orphans, widows, strangers and the poor, and one third he kept for himself.

According to the Mosaic Law, a tenth (i.e. a tithe) was to be devoted to the Lord and was used to support the priests and Levites (Numbers 18:20-24), a second tithe was used for the festivals (Deuteronomy 12:12-19) and third tithe every three years was set aside for the orphans, widows, strangers and Levites (Deuteronomy 14:28-29, 26:12-13). The Lord had promised that if people were faithful in doing this, He would open the windows of heaven and bless His people in the land (Deuteronomy 26:12-15, Malachi 3:8-10). The more Joachim gave, the more the Lord blessed him. While the Lord's blessing was strong on Joachim and Anna, there was one aspect where it was not: they were unable to have children.

Just as Hannah, the mother of the Prophet Samuel, was ridiculed for being unable to have children (1 Samuel 1:1-10), so Joachim and Anna were ridiculed. People assumed that because the Lord's blessing was absent in this part of their lives, that there was some secret sin. (Compare the man born blind: it was assumed that either he or his parents sinned - John 9:2-3). In the case of Joachim and Anna, around the time of their 50th wedding anniversary, the high priest publicly refused to accept their offering, calling them cursed when they came to present their offerings in accordance with the Law.

The Conception of Mary

Joachim and Anna returned to Nazareth and retired separately for prayer and fasting with many tears. Joachim spent his time in the remote hill country with his flocks while Anna prayed in the garden of their home. Both prayed separately that the Lord would work in them the wonder that He had done with Abraham and Sarah. And they separately agreed that they would dedicate the child to the Lord as Hannah did with Samuel (1 Samuel 1:11-2:11).

When Joachim went to the hills to pray, he did not intend to return until the Lord answered his prayer. Knowing this, Anna prayed and wept, mourning both her barrenness, her reproach among the people and her imminent widowhood. During this time of fasting and prayer, an angel appeared first to Joachim, then to Anna telling them (1) that their charitable deeds had gone up

into God's presence, (2) that their shame among men in the face of righteous living had not gone unnoticed and (3) that the Lord was going to answer their prayers. As a sign of this, the angel instructed Joachim and Anna separately to leave Nazareth and go to Jerusalem immediately. When they got there, they would meet each other by the Golden Gate of the city. The angel went on to say that the child to be born (Mary) would be filled with the Holy Spirit from her mother's womb and her life would be exemplary among her peers. This is very similar to the announcement by the angel Gabriel to the priest Zechariah concerning the birth of John the Baptist (Luke 1:4-23).

Anna and Joachim hurried to Jerusalem without knowing that the other had seen the angel also. Anna arrived first and waited for a long time before Joachim arrived driving a large herd: 10 lambs for the Lord, 10 calves for the priests and elders and 100 goats for the people who had ridiculed him. Since this was not a prescribed offering but a freewill offering which even Gentiles could offer, the high priest could not refuse (Leviticus 17:8). An interesting teaching in a similar vein by the Lord 45 years later involved loving one's enemies and doing good to those who hate us (Luke 6:27-36).

When they saw each other, Joachim and Anna rejoiced greatly. The next day, they offered their offerings and returned home to Nazareth together. When it was heard that Anna had conceived, all their neighbors and acquaintances rejoiced also and the whole land of Israel congratulated them.

From the above account, there was no more of an "immaculate conception" of Mary than there was of John the Baptist. As a further illustration of the similarity of the birth of Mary to the birth of John, an icon of the Virgin with her Child and an icon of John are conspicuously displayed at the front of all Orthodox churches: John next to the Lord on His left; Mary on the other side of the altar on His right. The doctrine of the immaculate conception was declared by Pope Pius IX in 1854, but has its roots back in the 14th and 15th Centuries.

The Birth of Mary

The birth or nativity of Mary is celebrated in the Orthodox Church as one of the twelve major feast days of the Church Year. In this context, the Church Year begins September 1st and the first major event is the Nativity of Mary on September 8th (emphasizing the Incarnation), followed quickly by the feast day of the Exaltation of the Cross on September 14th (emphasizing the Cross in our lives).

The Lord had said, "He who loves father or mother more than Me is not worthy of Me. And he who loves son or daughter more than Me is not worthy of Me. And he who does not take up his cross and follow Me is not worthy of Me" (Matthew 10:37-38). Joachim and Anna certainly had to bear their cross prior to Mary's birth. And as will be seen in the study of the feast day of the Presentation of Mary in the Temple, they did not hold back on their vow to dedicate Mary to the Lord's service. Beginning at the age of three, Mary began a celibate life of serving the Lord in the Temple in company with such notables as the Prophetess Anna (Luke 2:36-38), the Righteous Simeon (Luke 2:25-35) and the future Apostle Matthias (Prologue, August 9th).

Mary was born c.19 BC after a normal 9-month pregnancy. According to the Mosaic Law, Anna came to the Temple 80 days after giving birth to Mary for the rite of purification (Leviticus

12:2-8). At this time she gave her child the name Mary (Hebrew *Miriam*, just like Aaron's sister). Some discrepancy exists in early literature as to Mary's birth place: some say Nazareth; others say Jerusalem near the Sheep Gate. For a man as wealthy as Joachim, it is quite possible he had homes in both locations. However, his primary residence seems to be Nazareth.

Anna made her infant daughter's bed-chamber into a miniature copy of the Holy Place, like a sanctuary, and permitted nothing common or unclean to come near her. She also invited certain young virgins into her home to help care for and play with Mary. She was thus preparing Mary for the time when she would dedicate her daughter to the Lord's service as Hannah did the young Samuel.

According to Mosaic Law, the firstborn males received a blessing on the fortieth day after birth (Leviticus 12:2-4). This didn't apply to Mary; instead, Joachim invited the priests, scribes, elders and all the people to a feast at the first anniversary of Mary's birth. At this occasion, Mary was blessed by the priests and chief priests with the words "O God of our fathers, look upon this child and bless her with the utmost blessing which shall be an everlasting blessing, and give her an everlasting name throughout all generations." And all the people replied "Amen." This was an understandable reaction to Mary's birth to aged parents, just as "fear came on all those living in the hill country of Judea" (Luke 1:65-66) in reaction to the birth of John the Baptist to aged parents a few years later.

The Entry of Mary into the Temple

When Mary reached the age of three and was weaned (Hebrew mothers nursed their babies longer than modern women, 2 Maccabees 7:27, 1 Samuel 1:24) the time came for her to be dedicated to the Lord's service just as Hannah dedicated the Prophet Samuel (1 Samuel 1:21-2:11). This occasion was celebrated with considerable pageantry and ceremony and today the Orthodox Church celebrates this as another of the Twelve Major Feasts of the Church Year.

As part of the ceremony at the Temple, Mary was accompanied by a number of young virgins who had been her attendants. The chief priest was Zechariah who would later become the father of John the Baptist. The year was c.16 BC and there was some construction of the Temple going on as King Herod was financing major renovations. As Joachim and Anna presented their daughter to Zechariah as to the Lord, Zechariah was filled with the spirit and said, "Mary, the Lord God has magnified your name to all generations and, by you, to the very end of time, the Lord will show His Redemption to the children of Israel." With many other words Zechariah prophesied and rejoiced; then he led young Mary into the Temple with the other virgins. From the circumstances of her birth, everyone knew that there was something special about her.

For the next 7 years, Joachim and Anna visited young Mary often until they died. Joachim was 80 and Anna 79 when Mary was orphaned. During the construction of the new Temple, Herod had trained 1000 priests to be masons since only priests could enter the house and the inner court. At the time of Mary's entry into the Temple, the central part was completed but much construction was still underway. According to Josephus, however, the Ark of the Covenant was not in the Holy of Holies at any time during this period. Speculation today centers on whether the Ark had been carried away by the Babylonians or whether some priests hid it prior to the Babylonian invasion.

Growing up in the Temple

Mary's early years in the Temple were spent primarily in prayer and wool-work (weaving, etc.). From daylight to 9:00 a.m. she spent in prayer; from 9:00 a.m. to 3:00 p.m. she spent doing her weaving; and from 3:00 p.m. until bedtime she returned to prayer. Even in her early years, she became well known as an excellent weaver surpassing old experienced women. Later as a young teenager, she and some other similarly skilled virgins were commissioned to spin the special thread for the new veil for the Holy of Holies that would separate the Holy of Holies from the Holy Place.

Her physical appearance was described as beautiful and cheerful. No one ever saw her angry nor heard her speak evil and all her conversations were full of grace. She was anxious also about her companions (the other young virgins) that they might not sin even in one word or raise their voice in senselessness or act proud before their parents. Mary guarded herself carefully that she might not even inadvertently offend or appear proud before her peers. Thus, even as a young teenager, she gave the impression of one many times her age and was steadfast, immovable and unchangeable in her desire for the things of God.

The Temple complex was much more than just the Holy Place and the Holy of Holies. Surrounding the Holy Place were many rooms that served as living quarters for the priests, Levites and attendants and for studying the Law. Yet it is uncertain how much of this was completed during Mary's stay there and there was probably some shuffling and movement as more was completed.

Early sources state that Mary spent a lot of her time in the Holy of Holies in prayers. (The Holy of Holies may have been incomplete and its veil may not have been installed yet). She lived very much like her nephew John the Baptist who was to be born a few years later and she ate just one meal per day. The additional food given her by the priests, she gave to the poor. Angels were recorded as visiting her regularly and sometimes bringing her food, just as an angel brought Elijah food on several occasions (1 Kings 19:5-8). This should not be too surprising, since even the manna in the wilderness is called "the bread of angels" (Psalm 105:40 LXX).

Mary was thus spared the turmoil of everyday life. She meditated and nourished her soul on the Scripture available in the Temple by day and night. None of her peers exceeded her in the praises and vigils of God and she was very learned in the Law of God. Yet no one was more lowly in humility, more elegant in singing or more outstanding in virtue. In short, she was well known as an extraordinary young girl.

Also living in and around the Temple during this time were the Prophetess Anna, the aged Simeon and the future Apostle Matthais. Anna's life was described by Luke as "serving God with fasting and prayer night and day" where she "did not depart from the Temple" for the last 50-60 years of her life (Luke 2:36-38). Anna was undoubtedly very instructive and supportive of the young Mary.

Simeon is referred to as the Host of God for his encounter with the baby Jesus at the time of Mary's purification (Luke 2:22). Simeon was also numbered among the seventy translators of the Septuagint (from Hebrew into Greek) where the Septuagint was the Old Testament text used by the early Church and quoted by most of the writers of the New Testament. The Apostle Matthias was a student of Simeon. Thus Simeon, and probably Matthias also, would have known the young Mary from her birth as she was growing up in the Temple. Simeon's knowledge of

Mary's early life lends additional insight into his blessing of Joseph and Mary (Luke 2:33-35) and his request to depart this life in peace (Luke 2:28-30), having now seen the Messiah. He would have known that she was someone special from the circumstances of her birth, from her devout life, and from the unusual circumstances of her conception.

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Parables from the Old Testament

The birth of Mary began a process of revealing a mystery to mankind. “But we speak the wisdom of God in a mystery, the hidden wisdom which God ordained before the ages for our glory, which none of the rulers of this age knew; for had they known, they would not have crucified the Lord of Glory. But as it is written: ‘Eye has not seen nor ear heard, nor have entered into the heart of man the things which God has prepared for those who love Him’ “ (1 Corinthians 2:7-9, Isaiah 64:4).

The three readings for Vespers of the Feast of the Presentation plus the Epistle lesson all deal with the comparison between the Temple or Tabernacle as the place where the Lord dwelt, and the Virgin Mary’s womb where the Lord dwelt for nine months. The intent of this is to challenge our concept of who the Lord Jesus really is. He is God of God; and just because He set His privileges (as Deity) aside to become man (Philippians 2:6-8) does not mean He ceased being God. This is a difficult subject to grasp.

The Scribes and Pharisees had a great deal of trouble with this. When He claimed to be God, they wanted to stone Him (John 10:29-33, 8:56-59); they would not accept His Deity even through His miracles, by themselves, testified that this was so (John 15:24, 14:10-11, 3:2).

The Matins Gospel, describing the visit of the Virgin Mary with her cousin Elizabeth addresses another aspect of Jesus’ Deity: some heretics throughout the ages have claimed that Jesus took on Deity, perhaps at His baptism. Yet Elizabeth’s words, when she was filled with the Holy Spirit, describe Mary as the mother of God (in the flesh). He was fully God in her womb for nine months. Thus her womb took on the role of a tabernacle, or temporary dwelling place for God. While she contained God in the flesh, we similarly contain the Holy Spirit in a foretaste (Ephesians 1:14), since our bodies are a Temple of the Holy Spirit (1 Corinthians 6:19).

The Glory of the Lord Filled the Tabernacle: Exodus 40:1-35

The Lord had given the Law to Moses on Mt. Sinai in the third month of the year (Exodus 19:1), where the day of the giving of the Law was Pentecost (or the Feast of Weeks) according to Jewish tradition. Part of “The Law” was the Tabernacle and all its furnishings and all its procedures. Repeatedly, Moses was told to be sure to make the Tabernacle and its furnishings according to the pattern that was shown him on the mountain (Exodus 25:9, 40; 26:30; Numbers 8:4; Acts 7:44; Hebrews 8:5).

This reading from Exodus 40 took place in the first month of the second year after coming out of Egypt (Exodus 40:17). The Tabernacle, then, was about 9 months in construction (figuring a couple weeks for communication between Moses and God, both before and after construction).

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Once the Tabernacle was erected, everything in it, including the people who would enter as priests, were anointed with the anointing oil (vv.9-16). When everything was set up just as the Lord commanded Moses (vv.19-32), “then the cloud covered the tent of meeting, and the Glory of the Lord filled the Tabernacle. And Moses was unable to enter the tent of meeting because the cloud had settled on it, and the Glory of the Lord filled the Tabernacle (vv.34-35).

This came to be the sign of the Lord’s Presence: the cloud over the Tabernacle. If the cloud was over the Tabernacle, they stayed where they were. If the cloud was taken up from the Tabernacle, they moved. The Lord appeared as a cloud **on** the Tabernacle by day and as fire **in** the Tabernacle by night such that all the house of Israel could see it (vv.36-38). Similarly, the Glory of God filled the humble Virgin Mary.

The Glory of the Lord Filled the Temple: 1 Kings 7:51-8:11

After Solomon had finished constructing the temple for the Lord, he followed a procedure similar to that used by Moses in the Tabernacle. After consecration, the priests brought in all the utensils dedicated by his father David, along with the tent of meeting and the Ark of the Covenant (vv.1-4). This was witnessed by the elders of Israel, the heads of the tribes, the leaders of the fathers’ households and all the congregation of Israel (vv.1, 5), and took place in the seventh month (v.1) at the Feast of Tabernacles. [The Feast of Tabernacles speaks of the Kingdom of God in all its glory stretching out into eternity.]

After the priests came out of the Holy Place after depositing the Ark of the Covenant in the Holy of Holies, “the cloud filled the House of the Lord, so that the priests could not stand to minister because of the cloud, for the Glory of the Lord filled the House of the Lord” (vv.10-11).

The writer of 1 Kings pointed out that there was nothing in the Ark of the Covenant except the two tablets of stone that Moses put there at Horeb; i.e., at Mt. Sinai (v.9). the tablets of stone had been placed there when Moses came down from Mt. Sinai (Exodus 25:16, 21; Deuteronomy 10:1-5). But a jar of manna had also been placed inside the Ark (Exodus 16:32, 33). This manna had been collected the first day the manna fell, which was before the Ark was built.

Also in the Ark was Aaron’s rod that budded. This was placed there following Korah’s rebellion (compare Jude 1:11 and Numbers 16), where Korah, Dathan and Abiram questioned Moses’ authority and rebelled, and the earth opened up and swallowed them. To further show that Aaron was the one the Lord had chosen to be high priest and not Korah or anyone else, Moses asked for a rod (or walking stick) from the patriarch of each of the Twelve tribes. He wrote the name of the tribe on those rods and placed them before the Lord overnight. The rod that budded would be the high priest that the Lord had chosen. In the morning, Aaron’s rod not only budded, but produced flowers and ripe almonds (Numbers 17:1-11).

The East Gate: Ezekiel 43:27-44:4

This reading is used also for the Nativity of Mary, the Annunciation, and the Dormition, and also speaks about the Temple. Ezekiel's vision took place during the Babylonian captivity (Ezekiel 40:1). Ezekiel saw a vision of some future Temple and he described this Temple at length. This Temple was to be "the place of My Throne and the place of the soles of My feet where I will dwell among the sons of Israel forever" (Ezekiel 43:7). Presumably many, if not all, of the dimensions given to Ezekiel were incorporated in the Temple rebuilt by Ezra and Nehemiah after the captivity (Ezra 7:1-3) and reconstructed when Herod remodeled the Temple.

The parable here only addresses the East Gate of the Temple, which in Herod's Temple was the only gate into the Temple area. The East Gate opened onto the Garden of Gethsemane, the Kidron Valley, and the Mount of Olives. Similarly, the Tabernacle in the wilderness was always pitched such that the gate to the courtyard faced East. In Ezekiel's vision, the Glory of the Lord came into the house by the East Gate (Ezekiel 43:4). Ezekiel was told, "this gate shall be shut; it shall not be opened, and no one shall enter by it, for the Lord God of Israel has entered by it; therefore it shall be shut" (Ezekiel 44:2). The question about this passage is when was the East Gate permanently shut? There is no record of this occurring during or after the time of Christ; and "the Glory of the Lord" is unlikely to refer to anyone else.

Many of the Church Fathers spoke of this East Gate as prefiguring the Incarnation, where the East Gate represented the womb of the Virgin Mary. And as the East gate was shut in Ezekiel's vision, so the Virgin Mary remained a virgin her entire life according to her vow and the vow of her parents.

Epistle: Hebrews 9:1-7

The Epistle lesson also focuses on the Tabernacle, and by implication, the Temple that replaced it. Paul began by relating the Old Covenant (Genesis 15:18, 17:2; Exodus 19:5) to the Temple and the Divine services in and around the Temple. This was an important aspect of the Virgin Mary's life. When she was taken to the Temple as a three year old, the Temple life became her life along with all the services. Keeping a watchful eye on Mary were her cousin Elizabeth's husband Zechariah, along with Simeon and Anna (Luke 2:25-38) who also spent a lot of time in the Temple. Part of this Temple life was the morning and evening continual burnt offering (called Matins and Vespers today) and the liturgy associated with it (Exodus 30:7-9). Living in the Temple, Mary developed a lifestyle of devotion to God that was later used by celebrities in monasteries and convents.

Women were restricted as to which parts of the Temple grounds they could enter, and there was a separate "courtyard of the women" for this purpose. As mentioned in the introduction, Mary seems to have circumvented these restrictions, perhaps due to her innocence as a child. She was also well-known for having regular contact with angels during this time, and even entered the Holy of Holies on more than one occasion.

Jerome (4th Century) described Mary at this time as a woman of "surpassing purity which made her fit to be the mother of the Lord". When Gabriel spoke to her, Jerome said that, "she was

terror-stricken and unable to reply, for she had never been greeted by a man before” (Letter xxii). Ambrose (4th Century) stated that when Gabriel spoke to her, Mary trembled, being disturbed, as though at the form of a man; but on hearing his name, recognized him as one not unknown to her. And so, she was a stranger as to men, but not as to the angel; that we might know that her ears were modest and her eyes bashful (Concerning Virgins II, chapter 2).

The Epistle reading describes what was in the Holy Place and the Holy of Holies. In the Holy Place was the lampstand and the table with the showbread (v.2). The lampstand represents the Churches in various parts of the world (Revelation 1:20, 2:5). The table with the bread (eaten only by the priests), represents the Lord’s table (1 Corinthians 10:21) also called the Lord’s Supper that only the faithful, as priests of the New Covenant, partake of.

Inside the Holy of Holies was the Ark of the Covenant and the golden censer (vv.3-5). Overshadowing the Ark of the Covenant were the two cherubim on the Ark and the other cherubim embroidered into the curtains and carved into the doors. Thus the Ark was surrounded with cherubim. The Ark of the Covenant represents the Throne of God, since He was described as being enthroned between the cherubim (2 Samuel 6:2, 2 Kings 19:15, 1 Chronicles 13:6, Psalm 80:1, 99:1). The golden censer represents the prayers of the saints that are continually brought to the Throne of God by the angels (Revelation 5:8, Leviticus 16:12-13).

The Epistle reading continues (vv.6-7) to describe the priestly activities in the Holy Place and the Holy of Holies. The priests went into the Holy Place daily for the morning and evening offerings (Matins and Vespers) plus other additional services (Exodus 30:7-9). But only the High Priest was allowed into the Holy of Holies, and then only once per year on the Day of Atonement or Yom Kippur (the 10th day of the 7th month). He was required to take with him the blood of the offering for the Day of Atonement (Leviticus 23:26-32; Exodus 30:10).

The Temple worship “was symbolic for the present time (i.e. prior to Christ) in which both gifts and sacrifices are offered which cannot make him who performed the service perfect in regard to the conscience” (v.9). Because of this, “The Holy Spirit indicated that the way into the Holy of Holies was not yet made manifest while the first tabernacle was still standing” (v.8). John Chrysostom (4th Century) spoke of this saying: “These things indeed were there, but the Jewish people did not enjoy them; they didn’t see them (i.e. they weren’t allowed in). So that these things were no more theirs than ours for whom they prophesied”, where Chrysostom also spoke of the Holy of Holies as representing heaven (Homily XV on Hebrews 9). This was inaccessible while the first tabernacle was standing because our Great High Priest (i.e. Christ) had not yet entered “behind the veil” with His own blood to complete the Day of Atonement offering (Hebrews 6:19-20). Now that this has been done, we have a foretaste and a down payment of heaven - the Holy Spirit in us - and we can meet at the Throne of God in a mystery around the Lord’s Table.

The Tabernacle and the Temple were just a copy of the real Tabernacle in heaven (Revelation 15:5) and Moses was directed to make everything according to the pattern shown him on the mountain (Exodus 25:9, 40). The question then becomes how could the Presence of God take up residence in the womb of the Virgin Mary? How could she contain God who is a consuming fire, reaching into the heavens, as He appeared on Mt. Sinai (Deuteronomy 4:11, Exodus 24:17), and in leading His people into the Promised Land (Deuteronomy 9:3, compare

Hebrews 12:29)? How could she contain Him who appeared as a cloud over the Tabernacle by day and as a fire in the Tabernacle by night?

This difficulty has led some heretics to state that Jesus wasn't God while He was in Mary's womb, but that He took on Deity later, like at His baptism. To say that He wasn't God while in her womb contradicts the Scripture, such as Elizabeth calling Mary "the mother of my Lord" when Mary was only about one week into her pregnancy (Luke 1:43). Others have claimed that Mary, herself, was without sin and was conceived immaculately for this express purpose. Yet according to historical accounts, Mary was conceived in a manner similar to John the Baptist; and no one claims that John was conceived immaculately.

The resolution of the difficulty regarding Mary containing the Son of God is threefold: First, she was prepared for doing so by her presentation in the Temple and her life of devotion to God in the Presence of God. Second, she was given a special and extraordinary measure of grace. As Gabriel said to her, "Hail highly graced one, the Lord is with you; blessed are you among women" (Luke 1:28). This type of accolade or praise is not recorded in Scripture as ever having been given to anyone, including Moses, who spoke with God face to face as a man speaks to his friend (Exodus 33:11, Numbers 12:8, Deuteronomy 5:4, 34:10). And third, just as the Tabernacle and the Temple were filled with the Glory of God, so was the Virgin Mary. A careful consideration of this really elevates our understanding of the Incarnation.

Gregory of Neo-Caesarea (3rd Century), also called Gregory Thaumaturgus or Gregory the Wonder Worker to distinguish him from the other Gregories, had something to say about each of the above three points in his three homilies on the Annunciation. This Gregory was one of the saints in the early years of the Church who moved mountains with his prayers (according to John Chrysostom).

On Mary's Preparation

Gregory stated it this way: "The holy Virgin, in the life of the flesh, walked in all manner of virtues, and lived a life more excellent than man's common standard; therefore the Word that comes from God the Father thought it fit to assume the flesh, and introduce the perfect Man from her". He said she "would have had no strength to bear Him, had she not beamed forth for that time with all that is glorious and virtuous".

When she was greeted by Gabriel, "Hail you that are highly graced" (Luke 1:28), Gregory said that "she was perplexed by this word; for she was inexperienced in all the addresses of men, and welcomed quiet as the mother of prudence and purity. Yet being a pure and immaculate and stainless image herself, she did not shrink in terror from the angelic apparition, like most of the prophets, as indeed true virginity has a kind of affinity and equality with the angels. For the holy Virgin guarded carefully the torch of virginity, and gave diligent heed that it should not be extinguished or defiled" (Homily II on the Annunciation).

Gregory quotes Psalm 132 as referring to Mary: "Arise O Lord to Thy resting place; Thou and the ark of Thy sanctification" (Psalm 132:8). In this regard, he said, "For the holy Virgin is in truth an ark, wrought with gold both within and without (Exodus 25:10-11, 37:1-2), that has

received the whole treasury of the sanctuary” (Homily I on the Annunciation). Gregory also quotes Psalm 45 regarding Mary, “Harken, O daughter; give attention and incline your ear; forget your own people and your father’s house. So shall the King greatly desire your beauty; for He is the Lord your God, and you shall worship Him” (Psalm 45:10, 11).

All this was the result of Mary’s preparation during the approximately 12 years that she lived in the Temple. She lived a very righteous life. Those who say that she was able to do this because she was born without sin tacitly assume she couldn’t live a righteous life otherwise. In fact, the Lord did not pick just any Jewish girl to be His earthly mother; He picked a girl who was exemplary in purity of heart, soul, mind and strength.

On Mary’s Gift of Grace

Gregory stated that Gabriel called Mary “highly graced” inasmuch as with her was laid up the full treasure of grace. For of all generations, she alone has risen as a Virgin pure in body and in spirit; and she alone bears Him who bears all things on His Word. Nor is it only the beauty of this holy one in body that calls forth our admiration, but also the innate virtue of her soul” (Homily I on the Annunciation). Gabriel, he said, was sent to prepare the worthy chamber for the pure spouse and that her mind and her members were sanctified together (Homilies II, III on the Annunciation). As a result, she has been indeed set forth as the true cherubic throne (Homily II on the Annunciation).

Gregory stood in amazement at this saying, “The bounds of heaven and earth do not contain Him and how shall the womb of a virgin contain Him? Yet the tent of Abraham contained Him (Genesis 18), and there were there the depths of hospitality, where He showed Himself to Abraham at the door of the tent. But He quickly passed by it, as He who fills all things.”

“But how also can Mary sustain the fire of the divinity? The Throne of God blazes with the illumination of its splendor; and can the Virgin receive Him without being consumed? Yet if the fire in the wilderness injured the bush (Exodus 3:2), the Lord’s coming will indeed also injure Mary. But if that fire which served as a foreshadowing of the advent of the fire of divinity from heaven fertilized the bush and did not burn it, what can one say further of the Truth that descends not in flame of fire but in the form of rain (Psalm 72:6)? Both are the coming of the Lord (Homily III on the Annunciation). Truly Mary was given a great deal of grace.

One might note in this context that Paul referred to the Church as “abounding in the riches of His Grace” (Ephesians 1:7-8). In this respect Mary prefigures the Church as the dwelling place of God. But the Church has the Holy Spirit as a down payment (Ephesians 1:14); Mary contained Him who was the fullness of God (Colossians 2:9).

Mary was Filled with the Glory of God

Gregory elaborated on Mary’s consternation at the angelic announcement when she said, “How can this be, since I do not know a man?” (Luke 1:34). She did not wish to negate her vow of chastity, yet this seemed like she was being asked to do so. To her, Gregory said, the honor of virginity would seem to be on the verge of being lost. As the angel explained, the Lord was with

her (Luke 1:28), but the Lord was also going to be of her (Luke 1:35) in His flesh. This is the Glory of the Lord dwelling with the handmaiden. “He that is fairer than the sons of men” (Psalm 45:2) dwells with the fair virgin; He who sanctifies all things dwells with the undefiled (Homily I on the Annunciation).

“This creates a mystery which transcends all wonders: The Virgin brought forth and bore in her hand Him who bears the whole creation by His Word. He found no room in the inn Who formed the whole earth by His Word. She nourished with her milk Him Who imparts sustenance and life to everything that has breath. She wrapped Him in swaddling clothes who binds the whole creation fast with His Word. She laid Him in a manger Who rides seated upon the cherubim. A light from heaven shone round about Him who lightens the whole creation. The host of heaven attended Him with their doxologies who is glorified in heaven from before all ages. A star with its torch guided them who had come from the distant parts of the earth toward Him Who is the true Orient. From the East came those who brought gifts to Him Who for our sakes became poor. And the holy mother of God kept these words and pondered them in her heart, like one who was the receptacle of all the mysteries (Homily II on The Annunciation). Truly Mary was filled with the Glory of God and there can be no doubt as to Who it was that was in her womb for nine months.

Ambrose stated that when Gabriel said to Mary “Hail, full of grace” (Luke 1:28), he was plainly declaring the grace of the Holy Spirit which was in her, because the Holy Spirit had come upon her, and she was about to have her womb full of grace with the heavenly Word” (On the Holy Spirit I, chapter 7).

At the Feast of the Presentation of Mary, we see the beginning of all this, and we can see where it is leading up to. Some of the early historical accounts of the birth of Christ state that Mary began to have contractions as she and Joseph arrived in Bethlehem. Joseph quickly settled Mary in a shepherd’s cave while he went to get a midwife. When he returned with the midwife, they both saw a luminous cloud settled over the cave and found that Mary had already given birth to the Son of God. When the angel announced this to the shepherds (Luke 2:8-15), and they hurried to Bethlehem to see it, this luminous cloud is what astonished them. They also saw the Glory of the Lord that Mary had been filled with. Would “all those who heard it marvel at those things which were told them by the shepherds” (Luke 2:18), if all that the shepherds saw was a cute manger scene? The shepherds saw what Israel in the wilderness saw, and they returned to their flocks glorifying and praising God for all the things that they had heard and seen (Luke 2:20).

Mary's Humility

November 21, 2018

Matins Gospel: Luke 1:39-49, 56

Mary's humility, like that of her Son is illustrated in the Matins Gospel for the Presentation of Mary in the Temple, which is also used for the Nativity, the Annunciation and the Dormition (Luke 1:39-49, 56). This text describes Mary's visit to Elizabeth, the mother of John the Baptist, after the Annunciation. This reading and Gabriel's greeting to Mary preceding the Matins Gospel illustrate Mary's deep humility.

In the Annunciation, Gabriel's words: "Rejoice, highly graced one" (v.28) and "you have found grace with God" (v.30) indicate a very special honor to Mary. [The word "grace" and "graced" is the Greek word *charis* and is translated "grace" everywhere else in the New Testament, but often not translated so here.] If we compare this to Gabriel's announcement to Zechariah regarding the birth of John, Gabriel did not call Zechariah "highly graced". And yet it was quite an honor to be the father of John the Baptist -- whom Christ called the greatest of the prophets (Luke 7:28). Mary's response to Gabriel's announcement was a very humble statement, "Behold the slave (female) of the Lord! Let it be to me according to your word" (Luke 1:38). An archangel had just given her accolades unprecedented in all of human history and she still referred to herself as a slave!!! This is genuine humility!

As Mary arrived at Elizabeth's house following the Annunciation, Elizabeth, in the Spirit, spoke with a loud voice, "Blessed are you among women and blessed is the fruit of your womb! But why is this granted to me that the mother of my Lord should come to me?" (vv.42-43). Elizabeth recognized that Mary was pregnant with the Son of God and therefore "highly graced". This Elizabeth recognized even though Mary was in her first week of pregnancy.

But Mary's reaction was one of great humility, both to Gabriel and to Elizabeth. To Gabriel, Mary merely replied, "Behold the maidservant (i.e. female slave) of the Lord! Let it be to me according to your word" (v.38). To Elizabeth, Mary replied, "My soul magnifies the Lord, and my spirit has rejoiced in God my Savior. For He has regarded the lowly state of His maidservant (i.e. female slave); for behold, hence forth all generations will call me blessed (vv.46-48).

Even though she was so "highly graced" for bearing the Son of God, Mary never sought to exalt herself during her life. She was always content to stay in the background, praying, while the Twelve and others got all the recognition. This is a very good example for us: the only person who was ever called "highly graced" by God never sought recognition for herself. This is quite a contrast to attitudes today where it is fashionable to be arrogant and obnoxious and to revile anything that isn't easily understood.

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Gospel: Luke 10:38-42, 11:27-28

The Gospel lesson of the Presentation of Mary in the Temple, also used for the Nativity of Mary and the Dormition, is Luke 10:38-42 and Luke 11:27-28. The first part is the account of Mary and Martha when Jesus was invited to their house for dinner. Both Mary and Martha were among the eight “Myrrh-Bearing Women” at the Cross and at the Tomb. They were fairly wealthy and helped finance Jesus’ public ministry along with Mary Magdalene, Joanna and Susanna and the others (Luke 8:3). We see their wealth in (1) Mary’s ability to afford oil of spikenard worth 300 denarii to pour on Jesus (Mark 14:3-5; John 12:1-3) and (2) Lazarus’ funeral including the burial wrappings, a new tomb and prominent people in attendance (John 11:35-46). Common folk couldn’t afford a funeral like this and were buried much more simply.

The dinner at Mary and Martha’s took place in late 29 AD, or just a few months before the Crucifixion. Mary and Martha had been traveling with Jesus and helping to finance His ministry for several years at this time. During that time, it would have been their role to work in the background providing meals and accommodations for Jesus, the Twelve, the Seventy, etc. In this Gospel account, Martha was busy doing all the things she had been doing these last few years (Luke 10:40), but Mary took time out to sit at Jesus’ feet and listen (v.39).

The work carried out by the Myrrh-Bearing Women was a humble but necessary work. Martha reminded Mary that she needed to do her part and she even asked Jesus to back her up (v.40). Jesus replied by saying, “Martha, Martha, you are worried and troubled about many things. But one thing is needed, and Mary has chosen that good part, which will not be taken away from her” (vv.41-42). Martha had become somewhat arrogant in her preoccupation with serving; Mary had maintained her humble focus on doing the Lord’s Will. The serving really didn’t need to get done right away. The Lord could always have broken loaves and fish and fed the Seventy as He did the 5,000.

This Gospel lesson is used for feast days involving the Virgin Mary even though the person involved is Mary of Bethany. Mary of Bethany in this account illustrates the personality of the Virgin Mary: maintaining a quiet, cheerful devotion without getting overly concerned about material things. And this is also a good lesson for us: hearing the Lord’s Word is the most important part of our lives and this won’t be taken away from us. Positions of leadership may come to an end, but hearing the Lord’s voice goes on forever.

The second part of the Gospel lesson involves a brief answer Jesus made to a comment from someone in the crowd. Jesus had just taught His followers to pray using the Lord’s Prayer, explaining how our Heavenly Father is a good father (Luke 11:2-13). Following this, Jesus cast a demon out of a person who was demon-possessed, blind and mute. When the formerly possessed person then saw and spoke, the multitudes marveled and said, “Could this be the Son of David?” (Matthew 12:22-24, Luke 11:14-16). The Pharisees, however, ridiculed Jesus by saying that He cast out demons by Beelzebub, the ruler of the demons. Jesus then proceeded to debunk this claim by showing that Satan’s kingdom would be divided against itself if their claims were true.

Following this debunking, a woman in the crowd raised her voice and said to Jesus, “Blessed is the womb that bore You and the breasts which nursed you!” Jesus replied, ‘More than that; blessed are those who hear the Word of God and keep it’ “ (Luke 11:27-28).

Jesus had just been publicly acknowledged as the Messiah, the Son of David. The woman in the crowd was stating what every Jewish woman longed for: to be the mother of the Messiah. Such was to be a position of great honor and being barren was considered a curse since it meant that a woman couldn’t possibly be the mother of the Messiah.

In replying as He did, Jesus was not denying that His mother was blessed. He was merely pointing out that everyone else can be blessed also by hearing the Word of God and keeping it. This the Virgin Mary did very well.

The Family Tree of Jesus

FAMILY TREE OF JESUS

