
« TEACH ME SILENCE! »



At the onset of the 2003-2004 pastoral year when several brothers and sisters inaugurate or continue the mission given to them, what more could I wish them than a sense of wonder, of courage, and of joy? And if there is another wish to express, in this Year of the Rosary, it is to fully experience "silence." It is a privilege today to live these precious moments in the contemplation of God, in quiet service to our brothers and sisters, and with heart attuned to what the Spirit says to our Church. In the beautiful song which Sister Madeleine Dubé, O.P., of the Dominican Missionary Adorers, in Beauport, Québec, wrote in honour of the Virgin Mary, she asks the Blessed Mother to teach us... silence! "Virgin Mother, open and listening, teach me your silence, you, always attentive to the Word of God." I want to take the time to reflect with you on the vocation and mission of Mary, especially on her silence, at the Annunciation and her visit to Elizabeth, a silence so full to overflowing with the Word of God.

MARY OF NAZARETH

The Angel Gabriel appeared to a virgin who was betrothed to Joseph of the house of David; the angel was sent by God to a small town of Galilee called Nazareth, and the virgin's name was Mary. It is with words as simple as these that the evangelist Luke begins his account of the event which would change the entire course of humankind. Nazareth was at the time an obscure, out-of-the-way place of rather poor reputation. One day Nathaniel, who would become one of Jesus' disciples, would comment, "Can anything good come out of Nazareth?" But the words of the angel are overpowering: he didn't say as we do, "Hail, Mary." Rather, he addressed her by a totally different name: he called her "full of grace." An unusual name! "You have found favour with God!" Our Hail Mary has both names, Mary's own name, and the one given her by the angel, "Gratia plena." *The New American Bible* puts it this way: "Rejoice, O highly favored daughter! You have found favor with God. You shall conceive and bear a son and give him the name Jesus. Great will be his dignity and he will be called Son of the Most High... The Holy Spirit will come upon you and the power of the Most High will overshadow you; hence, the holy offspring to be born will be called Son of God. Know that Elizabeth your kinswoman has conceived a son in her old age; she who was thought to be sterile is now in her sixth month, for nothing is impossible with God." Mary said: "I am the servant of the Lord. Let it be done to me as you say." Thereupon Mary set out and hurried into the hill country to a town of Judah. When Elizabeth saw Mary, she exclaimed: "Blest are you among women and blest is the fruit of your womb. But who am I that the mother of my Lord should come to me? The moment your greeting sounded in my ears, the baby leapt in my womb for joy. Blest is she who trusted that the Lord's words to her would be fulfilled." It was at this point that Mary sang her great *Magnificat*, "My soul glorifies the Lord!"

"WE AWAIT YOUR ANSWER."

In his writings, St. Bernard (1090-1174) sums up the expectation of humankind. He writes: "You heard, O Virgin, that you would bear a son, not from man but from the Holy Spirit. The angel awaits your answer. He must return to the One who sent him. We, too, await, O Lady! The whole world, kneeling, awaits your answer. Hasten, O Virgin Mary! Answer the angel quickly; rather, answer the Lord through the angel. Say one word and welcome the Word, speak your word and give birth the Word of God; utter a passing word and hold the Eternal Word. Why postpone? Why be afraid? Believe, speak according to your faith and open your arms in welcome. Let your humility be bold, and your timidity become trust. Happy Virgin, open your heart to faith, your lips to speak words of acceptance, and your womb to the Creator. Give him your consent." Who can ever

imagine the immensity of this moment when the angel waits for Mary's response? We have reached the fullness of time. Mary speaks her "fiat" (Let it be as you wish.). Full of humble surrender, an acceptance which contains all the unknown dimensions of her own fate and the fate of all humankind. A moment of exceeding greatness: no trumpet sound, no blaring horns, just a moment of silence, and God comes to dwell among us. "The Word was made flesh, and made his abode in our midst."

MISSIONARIES WITHOUT TRANSPORTATION

"We do not carry the Word of God hidden in a suitcase: we carry it with us, within us." This is what the French laywoman mystic and labourer, Madeleine Delbr el (1904-1964), writes in her book, *Nous autres, gens des rues* [We, the Street People]. She invites us to steep ourselves in the great mystery of the incarnation and visitation. One does not keep the Word of God locked up in a corner of oneself, in one's memory as on a pantry shelf. We let the Word go into the very depths of ourselves. We cannot be missionaries without having honestly, warmly, and cordially welcomed the Word of God, the Gospel, in our hearts. The dynamic tendency of this Word is to be alive, to become flesh, to take flesh in us. This is what Madeleine Delbr el understood about the great mystery of the incarnation. In the silence of Nazareth, Mary welcomed the Word of God into her innermost being. It is now our turn to carry the Word to our brothers and sisters near and far. For Mary, the two actions are intimately joined: she received the Word, and she hastened to others.

"A SILENCE THAT SPEAKS"

Madeleine Delbr el, who lived among the working class and who got around by subway and bus, left us some guidelines on silence. Here are a few, stamped with her own sense of humour: "The first step up the ladder to the mystical life, the ladder of silence, is to avoid listening to oneself talking. And the next-to-last step of that same ladder is listening to others. Silence is made for us to listen to God. When God speaks through His creatures, it is not always polite to cut Him off! God calling doesn't break the silence, that is why the ringing telephone, the doorbell, and the familiar calls of your brothers and sisters do not break the silence." She added: "Don't try to stop talking, only listen! Just say whatever does not make God keep silent! One must learn to be silent when possible, so as to be able to speak when one ought to!" "Distractions become prayers when it is with God that we think of them; it is sometimes more distracting trying to fight them." "Speak to God instead of to yourself; you will at least have that time to pray." "If you go to the end of the world, you find a path to God; if you go deep within yourself, there you find God Himself." "If you love the desert, remember that God prefers people to the desert." "Another day is dawning: God in me wants to live this day fully. He did not hide from others, he walked among them, and with me He is still among the people today." Silence is really the availability of the heart open to God and one's neighbour.

A LISTENING HEART

Many prayers ask for a listening heart... "O Virgin Mother, open and listening, teach me your silence, you always attentive to the Word of God. O Virgin of light, always remain the humble star shining on my path and guiding me to God. Universal Mother, open wide my whole being, that I may love without measure, with the very heart of God."

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