

“Blessed is she who believed”: Mary as a Model of Faith and Trust

It is in the first chapter of St. Luke’s Gospel that we read of the encounter of Our Blessed Mother with her cousin Elizabeth – the event that we meditate on in the second of the Joyful Mysteries of the Rosary. Elizabeth has been filled with the Holy Spirit, the baby leaps in her womb and she greets Mary in words with which we are all familiar. And the last thing Elizabeth says in her inspired greeting is: “*And blessed is she who believed that there would be a fulfillment of what was spoken to her from the Lord*” (Lk. 1:45). When one considers the perfection of Our Blessed Mother’s soul and all the graces and virtues she possessed, it may be surprising that what the Holy Spirit singled out as worthy of special praise was Mary’s *faith*, the fact that “she *believed* there would be a fulfillment of what was spoken to her from the Lord.”

It seems to me that when we meditate on the spiritual riches of Our Blessed Mother’s soul we do not often consider her virtue of faith. When it comes to the great mysteries that we are called on as Christians to believe, for example, the mystery of the Trinity or of the Divinity of Christ, or His real presence in the Eucharist, I think we have a tendency to assume that Mary enjoyed some sort of special *knowledge* with regard to these things. But during her earthly life, did she know about these truths in the strict sense of *knowing*, or did she have to believe them just as we do on the testimony of God who reveals them? Of course, she had to believe these truths just as we do. Mary is the model of *faith* for the whole Church.

In considering the faith of the Blessed Virgin I would like to offer a little reflection on just one aspect of this virtue, an aspect that is sometimes overlooked, namely, that in any act of faith there is not only the element of the assent of the intellect to some truth of the faith — a truth that can be

expressed in a proposition such as: Christ is true God and true man — but also the fact that we accept this truth not because we see it for ourselves, but we accept it solely on the testimony of another person. So the act of faith, and more generally, living a life based on faith, always involves *trusting in a person* as well as assenting to some truth. As St. Thomas Aquinas writes in one place: “It belongs to faith both to believe something and *someone*” (*Summa Theologiae*, II-II, q. 129, a. 6). So a life of faith also carries with it this notion of trust, trust in another person and in his word.

And so I would like to consider this aspect of Our Lady’s faith, and I would like to do this by putting it into the larger context of salvation history. If we look through the whole story of Sacred Scripture we find that this question of faith and trust in God is something very fundamental, because it is something that goes to the heart of man’s relationship to God. And we see this matter touched upon in the very first pages of Genesis.

If we look at the trial of our first parents in the garden we find that the heart of their trial was really a question of whether or not they were willing to trust God. When the devil comes to tempt Eve in the garden the first thing he says to her is: “Did God say, ‘You shall not eat of any tree of the garden?’” The first thing the devil tries to do is sow *doubt* in the mind of Eve. And after Eve answers by telling him that they are not permitted to eat of the fruit of the tree which is in the middle of the garden, lest they die, the serpent, in effect, responds by saying: it’s not true that you will die; in fact, if you eat of that tree your eyes will be opened and you will be like God. So what the devil is insinuating to Eve is: you know, *you really can’t trust God*. He isn’t letting you eat of that tree, not because there is something *wrong* with that tree, but because *He wants to keep*

something good from you. God is just making an arbitrary rule that has nothing to do with your happiness. He is really acting like a tyrant and you just can't trust Him.

There is a wonderful passage in the *Catechism of the Catholic Church* that makes just this point about the nature of the trial and fall of our first parents in the garden. The Catechism says: "Man, tempted by the devil, *let his trust in his Creator die in his heart* and, abusing his freedom, disobeyed God's command. This is what man's first sin consisted of." And then the Catechism goes on to make this interesting observation: "*All subsequent sin would be disobedience toward God and lack of trust in his goodness*" (CCC n. 397).

And then, if we flip ahead a few more chapters in the book of Genesis, we find God testing Abraham in a similar fashion. He puts Abraham in various situations of trust. And although Abraham is called the great father of faith, if we read the story carefully we see that Abraham's response to God was not always perfect. Trust in God was something that he had to learn and grow in over time.

Very early on God had promised Abraham that He would give him a son through Sarah and that his descendants would be as numerous as the stars of heaven. But after 10 years in the land of Canaan there is still no sign of a child and things aren't looking very hopeful: He's 85 years old, Sarah is 76. And it seems that Sarah, at least, is getting impatient. So Abraham decides to follow his wife's advice and take Hagar the Egyptian and she conceives and bears him a son whom he names Ishmael. Then another 14 years go by. Now Abraham is 99 and Sarah 90 and still no child and God appears again to Abraham and renews His promise about a son. And Abraham responds by saying: "O that Ishmael might live in your sight!" In this response we see how Abraham's faith and trust in God are wavering. He's basically saying to God: "Can't I do things my way? This way makes sense to me". But then God fulfills His promise

and Isaac is born, and, no doubt, this fulfillment of the promise helped to strengthen Abraham in his interior life of faith and trust. So when it comes to the final great trial of his life, when he is asked to sacrifice his own son, we see that Abraham displays heroic faith and trust.

If we turn to the story of Moses, we find the same kind of testing. And in the case of Moses we also see that his response to God's invitation to trust and believe in him is not always perfect and he needs some schooling as well. At the burning bush on Mount Sinai God asks him to go back to Egypt to free the Israelites from the bondage of Pharaoh. Moses spends a good while wrangling with God, trying to convince Him that the whole idea is crazy. And, of course, the whole idea was crazy. So again we find God asking someone to do something that runs contrary to our human way of thinking, and simply to trust in Him. And as the story of Moses continues we see more trials of a similar kind.

And the same pattern continues throughout the whole Old Testament with Saul and King David and with the Prophets. And so all throughout salvation history we see God calling on people and inviting them to trust in Him, to believe in what He says. And though we see some fidelity and trust on the part of the great men of the Old Testament, their response is never perfect; there is always something lacking.

And then we come to the Blessed Virgin Mary. Finally, God has someone who gives Him the perfect response, a complete and total act of faith and surrender: "Behold the handmaid of the Lord, be it done unto me according to your word." So when one takes this longer, biblical view of the whole matter, one can see why, of all the virtues that the Blessed Mother possessed, the Holy Spirit would single out the virtue of faith as especially worthy of praise. By her faith and trust Our Blessed Mother reverses the sin of our first parents and shows us this fundamental attitude that we should have in our relation to God. ✠