

Walking with Mary on the Path to Holiness

Thursday, June 11, 2020 ~ Mary and the Virtues



“I came that they might have life and have it more abundantly” (John 10:10b). With these words, Jesus reveals his ardent desire to free us and fulfill us. People live life, but perhaps not with vitality. The infinite, eternal God made Adam and Eve in his own image and gave them communion of life with Himself. The garden of Eden, or “Paradise”, was a place of abundance (cf. Gen 1:26-30). The Fall introduced sin into the world. God promptly promised a remedy: The Son of a Woman to come, who would crush the head of the serpent (cf. Gen 3:15). God ceaselessly calls us back to communion with Himself. When we develop good habits, or

virtues, we increase our likeness to God and our communion with Him. The Blessed Virgin Mary lives in perfect communion with God, she reflects his image, and she radiates virtue.

Recall again the garden of Eden: God placed man there to cultivate the garden and care for it, to be its stewards (cf. Gen 2:8-9, 15). Each person’s life is like a garden, and we are stewards of our lives. Imagine the Immaculate Heart of Mary as a garden where God delights to dwell—think of Botanica! At baptism we become God’s living temples; let’s extend the analogy to be his spacious gardens. We cultivate virtue in our interior gardens with God’s help. St. Gregory of Nyssa says that “The goal of a virtuous life is to become like God” (CCC n. 1803).

Mary’s Immaculate Heart overflows with grace and virtue. She can help us increase the virtue in our hearts. The Catechism defines virtue as “an habitual and firm disposition to do good” (n. 1833). A virtue is a *disposition*, a frame of mind. It is *habitual*, or second-nature; it is *firm*, that is, established—like a plant with strong roots. We increase our virtue by asking God for help and then cooperating with Him. There are theological virtues—faith, hope, and charity; these virtues are given by God, and we strengthen them by making acts of faith, hope, and

charity (cf. CCC n. 1813-20). There are also human virtues—such as the cardinal virtues of prudence, justice, fortitude, and temperance (cf. CCC n. 1804-12).

Let us ask Mary to help us cultivate virtue in our interior gardens, just as she did in hers. How do we care for a physical garden? We have to (1) prepare the environment, (2) plant seeds, and (3) maintain the garden; (4) we renew this process each year at springtime. We do the same in our spiritual lives: prepare, plant, maintain, renew.

Before planting anything, you have to prepare the soil. This spring I worked pretty hard tilling soil with clay, rocks, and deep, established weeds. Seeds don't grow very well in a hostile environment; recall Jesus' parable about the sower and the different types of soil (cf. Mt 13:1-9, 18-23). However, in a well-prepared environment seeds can grow and flourish to their potential. The same is true with virtue. What sort of environment is in our hearts? We have an exterior environment and an interior environment; both affect the quality of our hearts, our interior gardens.

Imagine the exterior environment of Mary: she was a faithful Jew who kept the sabbath and listened to God's Word; she lived in a home filled with charity and peace; she faithfully lived her vocation as a wife and mother. Imagine her interior environment: the angel Gabriel addressed her as "full of grace"; the Annunciation and Visitation give evidence of her character and generosity (cf. Lk 1:26-56). Mary prepared the environment of her interior garden, making it a favorable atmosphere for virtue.

We, too, must prepare the environment of our hearts for God to work and dwell within them. Maria Montessori, a doctor and educator, emphasized the importance of exterior environments. She observed children and factors in their development. She realized the critical role of orderly and peaceful surroundings (cf. *Absorbent Mind*, 24, 61-62). The same applies to adults: our exterior environment affects us in subtle ways we might not realize.

Here is an analogy called "The Stairsteps to Virtue". The stairs begin with sensory input, especially what we see and hear; if these things are good, they lead us upward to good thoughts. If we think of good things often, we will start to desire them. Repeated good desires lead to good actions. And repeated good actions form a good habit—that is, a virtue! Virtues

lead us closer to God, the source of all goodness. However, this process can also go the opposite direction, toward vice. Seeing and hearing bad things will lead to bad thoughts. Repeated bad thoughts lead to bad desires; repeated bad desires drag us down toward bad actions. Repeated bad actions lead to a bad habit—that is, a vice—which shrinks away from God. If we want to grow in virtue like Mary, we must be vigilant about the quality of our exterior environment—which affects the quality of our interior environment. Cardinal Schonborn clarifies that “vices and virtues [...] do not exist on the same level, as if it were a matter of indifference whether one trained oneself in good or bad modes of conduct. Vices are detrimental to our humanity, whereas virtues build it up” (*Following Jesus*, 95).

We can control some aspects of our exterior environment. For example, holy images remind us of God’s constant presence: a crucifix, a saint picture, or a Scripture quote. We can place these where we will see them often—in our homes, cars, workplaces, computer screens, and phones. We can prepare a designated prayer space in the bedroom, the living room, or both. We can also examine the quality of our entertainment: music, movies, reading material, online activity, et cetera. Do these items in our environment provide good soil for God to plant the seeds of virtue?

Our interior environment also requires attention. As in a physical garden, our hearts may contain obstacles to healthy growth. Our interior gardens might have rocks, pests, and weeds that are difficult to remove. It takes a lot of effort to extract vices and faults from our hearts. There may be some vices and sins that only God can completely eradicate. Let us trust Him with the inmost recesses of our interior gardens; He can free us of these impediments to growth. He does this through the sacrament of Reconciliation, Holy Communion, and our total surrender to Him in silent prayer. As with physical gardening, this can take time and patience. Mary consistently entrusted herself to God, and she will help us do the same. Author Fr. Bernadot writes, “[Mary] knows my history, my lapses, my present dangers, and the graces that I need in order to persevere. [...] Do not earthly mothers read into their children? [...] Mary sees everything in the divine vision. Often, without being invoked, she intercedes for us” (*Our Lady in Our Life*, 36).

Preparation takes a lot of work, but it is only the first step; next, we have to plant seeds!

Author Donald DeMarco observes that

“Trying to become virtuous merely by excluding vice [...] is as unrealistic as trying to cultivate roses solely by eliminating weeds. After clearing the garden of weeds, one must still plant seeds or cuttings and nurture their growth; otherwise, the weeds simply return. The best way to exclude vices is to crowd them out with the presence of strong virtues” (*Heart of Virtue*, 13-14).

In the garden of our hearts, God gives the grace and we cooperate.

Consider Our Lady: God gave her the extraordinary grace of the Immaculate Conception; he gave her the theological virtues of faith, hope, and charity; she practiced many human virtues, such as humility, obedience, and purity. At the Annunciation she became a living tabernacle, carrying God Incarnate within her; the Holy Spirit was active in her, most notably at the Annunciation and Pentecost; after Jesus’ Resurrection she would have received Him in Holy Communion and continued to ponder his life in her heart. God planted so many seeds of virtue in Mary’s interior garden, perhaps some known only to Himself.

God plants the seeds of grace and virtue in our hearts as well. He gives us tremendous gifts in Baptism: we become living temples of the Blessed Trinity, receiving the infused virtues of faith, hope, and charity. At our Confirmation he augments the gifts of the Holy Spirit, seeds that we must continue to nurture. In receiving the Eucharist, we receive God Himself, the source of all goodness and virtue. We become living tabernacles; Jesus dwells within us. Holy Communion is the only sacrament of initiation that can be repeated; receiving Our Lord continuously initiates us more fully into communion of life with God and, in Him, with one another. St. Peter Julian Eymard prayerfully studied our Lord in the Blessed Sacrament. He writes, “Jesus is alive in His sacramental state, living His own eucharistic life. [...] See in Jesus Hostia the virtues which you should practice; appropriate them to yourselves and complete them in yourselves” (*The Eucharist*, 270). Consider Jesus’ virtues in the Eucharist: charity, humility, patience, and generosity, to name a few. From within us, Jesus helps us practice virtue. St. Peter Julian also observes,

“The more we desire to come near to God and to live a virtuous life, the more we must expect combat; consequently, we need to gather more and more strength in order not to be vanquished. For all these struggles of the Christian life, the Holy Eucharist will give the necessary strength” (*Holy Communion*, 21).

There are also seeds that we can plant in our hearts. Recall the stairsteps to virtue: the things we hear influence our thoughts. Have you ever had a song stuck in your head after listening to it several times? We can apply this capacity of the human mind to plant seeds of virtue. For example, we can commit God’s Word to memory by reciting or chanting the psalms in the Liturgy of the Hours; repeating Scripture is so good for us, because “the Word of God is living and effective” (Heb 4:12). We can also listen to Christian music. St. Paul recommends, “Let the word of Christ dwell in you richly [...] singing songs, hymns, and spiritual songs with gratitude in your hearts to God” (Col 3:16). Mary’s Magnificat is a hymn in praise of God (cf. Luke 46-55). It weaves together many phrases and themes from the Old Testament. As Jesus says, “From the fullness of the heart, the mouth speaks” (Lk 6:45).

We can also plant seeds by praying the rosary, pondering the life of Jesus with Mary. Jesus models many virtues in the mysteries of his life: in the joyful mysteries, humility; in the luminous mysteries, charity and patience; in the sorrowful mysteries, perseverance and obedience to the Father; in the glorious mysteries, kindness and generosity. There are many more treasures of virtue to discover in the mysteries of the rosary. Try praying the rosary looking for virtue in Jesus and his companions, and see what you observe. Meditation on Scripture also plants the seed of God’s Word in our minds. We can set aside time before or after Mass to ponder the readings of the day, perhaps focusing on a particular virtue.

Virtues are like seeds: they start off small, not very impressive, and they are rather fragile before they grow and become established. Fr. Thomas Dubay, an author, encourages beginners in prayer to look to their goal. He says, “Oak trees tell us what acorns are about [...]. We understand the beginnings fully only when we grasp their mature, complete stage of growth” (Dubay, 66, 83). In a similar way, we can look at the Immaculate Heart of Mary as a model of virtue: look at the marvels God can bring about in a human person! This reality can encourage us as we nurture the seeds of virtue in our own hearts.

In a tangible garden, once we have prepared the environment and planted seeds, we have to maintain the garden. New converts face this challenge. We have all heard of “R.C.I.A.”, the Rite of Christian Initiation of Adults. R.C.I.A introduces people into the Christian life and the Catholic Church. How does a new convert maintain this new faith and continue growing? Let me propose another “R.C.I.A.”: Recommended Christian Invigoration for All! We must invigorate, or revitalize, our Christian life of virtue. Here are four ideas for maintaining our interior garden, again with the letters “R.C.I.A.”: Recollection, Companions, Intention, and Action.

Recollection is collecting our thoughts and being present to God, who is always present to us. Mary maintained her recollection in part by pondering the life of Jesus in her heart. Author Fr. Jacques Philippe notes, “Out of all created beings, the Virgin Mary is the one who most lived in the shadow of the Holy Spirit. [...] Mary is our mother in the order of grace. As such, she hands on to us [...] her trust in God, her total self-giving to God’s will, her silence, and her inner listening to the Spirit” (*Holy Spirit*, 65-66).

Like Mary, we can maintain our interior gardens by striving for recollection. There are some aspects of our exterior environment we cannot control. However, we *can* consciously decide to think of God in our everyday occupations. For example, we have to drive with our eyes open, and we will probably notice signs along the way. Thanks to commercials in my childhood, when I drive by Burger King I remember its slogan: “Your way, right away.” Now, I don’t need my way right away, and neither do you. So instead, when I see Burger King I like to think: “*Christ* the King: *Your way, right away!*” Here are some more ideas: A green light means “Go”; when you see one, remember Mass: “Go in peace, glorifying the Lord by your life!” When you handle money, remember Jesus in the Gospel saying about a coin, “Give to Caesar what belongs to Caesar, and to God what belongs to God” (Mk 12:17). When you use a plate for a meal, recall Jesus at the Last Supper. Spend a little time brainstorming: How you can turn your mind to God using neutral objects in your environment? Recalling that God is present should help us strive for virtue. We can whisper a prayer to Him anytime, and He is always ready to help us when we ask.

Recollection helps us remember that God is our constant companion; He also gives us many other companions on earth. We become like the company we keep; good companions can help us strive for virtue. Mary's primary companions were Jesus and St. Joseph. Then St. John took Mary into his home after Jesus' crucifixion (cf. Jn 19:25-27). Mary continued praying with the early Church, as we see between the Ascension and Pentecost (cf. Acts 1:9-10, 13-14; 2:1-4). Mary was a good companion to others during her earthly life, and she can be an invisible companion to us here and now.

We have various companions in our lives. We choose some of them, such as friends; others are given to us, such as family members, co-workers, and acquaintances. The quality of our friendships will affect the way we think and act—recall the stairsteps to virtue. Scripture says, "A faithful friend is a sturdy shelter; he who finds one finds a treasure" (Sir 6:14). Faith-filled friends can challenge and support one another in the Christian life. A spiritual director or accountability partner is also a valuable companion in striving for holiness. Such trusted companions can help us follow Jesus and bear lovingly with those other companions in life—those we did not freely choose.

Some of our companions probably have qualities that make virtue a challenge. St. Paul says, "Make the most of every opportunity" (Eph 5:16). Look through the lens of opportunity: Challenging relationships have tremendous potential for helping us grow in virtue! Perhaps someone's disposition or conduct causes a negative reaction in us. God may be calling us to grow in a virtue relevant to the situation. Only He knows all the hidden crosses they carry. We can ask ourselves, "How can I be a better companion to this person? How can I encourage virtue in him or her?" St. Paul tells us, "Let us build up one another in love" (cf. Gal 5:13; Eph 4:2). After all, we're all in this together!

To recap, we maintain the virtues in our interior gardens by recollection, good companions, and ... intention. Our intention determines our focus. We must be intentional to overcome vice and develop virtue. Cardinal Schonborn points out that "Vices do not come into being through the toil of practice but by continually letting oneself go [...]. Vices grow through neglect, like weeds in an overgrown garden; virtues grow when they're cultivated and worked at; they need constant attention" (*Following Jesus*, 95-96). Regarding intention, Cardinal

Schonborn also speaks of the basic orientation of our lives. He says, “The virtues are attitudes that make us ready and willing to do what is good, dispositions of the personality that lead us to do what is right with a certain spontaneity” (*ibid.*, 107). Jesus teaches that “A tree is known by its fruit. [...] A good tree bears good fruit and a rotten tree bears bad fruit” (Mt 12:33; 7:17). Scripture reveals Mary’s fundamental intention to love God and neighbor. Mary made herself available and attentive to God and other people, and this intention bore fruit in her life; we see this in several mysteries of the rosary. She intentionally cooperated with God’s grace in the circumstances of her life.

We must be intentional, because our underlying desires drive us. Recently I came across this saying: “What you see is largely determined by what you’re looking for.” Do we intentionally look for evidence of God’s presence with us? Do we actively identify a particular virtue we need to practice? Do we seek out and encourage virtue in others? The Act of Contrition uses the language of intentionality: “I *firmly resolve*, with the help of your grace, to do penance, to sin no more, and to avoid the near occasion of sin.” We can also *firmly resolve* to practice the virtue that counteracts our predominant sin. Let us ask Our Lady to help us deliberately maintain and develop the virtues in our hearts.

Good intentions are important, but we also have to translate them into actions. By repeating the same good actions, we will form good habits—virtues! Of course, new habits require practice. When learning a language or a musical instrument, no one becomes an expert on the first day; the same is true with virtue. We have to practice, and persevere in trying without becoming discouraged. St. Paul uses the analogy of athletes *striving* to achieve excellence (cf. 1 Cor 9:24-27). Remember these words of St. Paul, too: “I can do all things through Christ who strengthens me” (Phil. 4:13). Mary is immaculate, without sin, and even she grew in virtue. God stretched her in new ways throughout her earthly life, and she actively responded.

Like Mary, we want to practice virtues—but where do we begin? The daily Examen prayer can help us discern how God is calling us to grow—right here, right now. The Examen is a review of the day with God, recognizing his leading and our responses (cf. Gallagher). If we spend this time with God at the end of each day, we might detect a pattern—such as a lack of

patience, honesty, or diligence. Then, we plan with God how we will practice the particular virtue we need the next day.

Virtuous living involves a lot of factors! We prepare a favorable environment, plant seeds, and maintain our interior garden. In a flower garden or vegetable garden, there's also a renewal each spring. It's a good idea to renew our interior gardens—our hearts—every year also. Mary and Joseph made a pilgrimage to Jerusalem each year—recall the finding of Jesus in the temple (cf. Lk 2:41-52). We already have the season of Lent built into the liturgical year. It also helps to make an annual retreat, anywhere from a day to a week long. This means stepping back from the daily busyness and setting aside time with God, to gain fresh perspective and be renewed in our discipleship.

Now, this all sounds very lovely: growing virtues in our interior gardens where God can dwell as in a paradise... but then we look around and see neighbors with all kinds of dandelions! Look at our society: not everyone is striving for virtue. In fact, this has been the case since the Fall of Adam and Eve. We are our brothers' keeper, but we are not our brothers' *lawn* keeper. What can we do to help our neighbors without personally meddling in their lives?

Let's look at our models, Jesus and his mother Mary. They helped their neighbors by the holy quality of their own lives. Mary and Joseph were turned away from the inn Christmas night (cf. Lk 2:4-7); soon after that, they had to flee to a foreign land to save Jesus from Herod (cf. Mt 2:13-15). Imagine the virtues they practiced rather than cherishing self-pity. During Jesus' ministry Mary would have heard about the opposition toward Jesus by scribes, Pharisees, and even some relatives (cf. Mt 13:54-58; 26:4; Mk 3:6, 20-22; 12:13). Imagine the virtues she exercised rather than nursing a grudge. Mary knew Jesus' teaching to "pray for those who persecute you" (Mt 5:44). Mary witnessed the religious leaders and Roman soldiers mistreating and executing Jesus on Good Friday (cf. Mk 15:16-20, 27-32; Jn 19:25). Imagine the virtues she practiced rather than manifesting anger or bitterness. As Jesus suffered and died on the cross to save sinners, Mary stood at his side, pleading for their conversion—and our conversion.

Like Mary, we can love our neighbors by helping them with secret acts of virtue. These are spiritual alms. Jesus tells us, "Let your deeds of mercy be secret, and the Father who sees in secret will repay you" (Mt 6:1-4). The world says, "Publicize your life! Be the center of

attention!”—but we don’t have to. Jesus and Mary lived a hidden life for 30 years, radiant with virtue, and this glorified the heavenly Father. Let us also practice prudence and discretion on behalf of those who don’t. The world says, “Beauty is everything” and “Show off your body”—but we don’t have to. St. Peter advises women, “Your adornment should not be [...] jewelry or fine clothes, but rather the hidden character of the heart, [...] the imperishable beauty of a gentle and calm disposition, which is precious in the sight of God” (1 Pt 3:3-4). This sounds like a description of Our Lady. Let us also practice modesty and chastity according to our vocation on behalf of those who don’t. The world says, “Supersize it—meals, houses and furnishings, everything!”—but we don’t have to. Jesus, Mary, and Joseph were poor and lived within their means. Let us also practice temperance with food and property on behalf of those who don’t. Let us ask Our Lord for a zealous and apostolic spirit in spreading the Gospel by our manner of life.

Mary wants to help us—and the rest of the world—reach the fullness of life God has intended for us. As we cultivate virtue, let us look to the Immaculate Heart of Mary as our model and companion. Our interior gardens are like physical gardens: It’s realistic to focus our energies on a few things at a time. Ask Our Lord where you need to focus in developing virtue—preparing the environment, planting seeds, or maintaining the garden. If you would like spiritual reading on Mary and the virtues, you can find a page of “Works Cited and Consulted” at the end of this talk online (in the document format). Let us strive for virtue with Mary’s help! May we live in communion with God and reflect his image, in this life and in eternity.

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