

Walking with Mary on the Path to Holiness

Tuesday, June 16, 2020 ~ Mary and Obedience



This is our 21st public novena to the Immaculate Heart of Mary. This is my 19th novena talk. When Mother Mary Magdalene suggested that I give a talk, my first thought was, “What more could I possibly think of to say?” When I paused before answering she added, “Perhaps on Mary and obedience.” Obedience ... holiness ... my response? “Yes, Mother, I’d **love** to give a talk on Marian obedience!”

As I reflected on this theme of obedience, especially in relation to the Immaculate Heart, I thought it best to first establish some presuppositions.

1. On the night of the Last Supper, Jesus told his closest companions, “If you love Me, keep my commandments.” Obedience is a fruit of love and a proof of love. The virtue of obedience is not to be equated with the obedience training of pets or even of teaching toddlers the meaning of the very important word, “no!” Obedience is the greatest gift we can give because it is giving back to God His greatest gift to us: our free will. Not “giving back” in the sense that I no longer have it, but in the sense that it will from here on out, be used according to His purpose, for His greater glory and honor, and thus my own sanctification.
2. As I said, obedience is a proof of love, but it also **proves** our love. Love is not merely a warm emotion or affection. Obedience removes all self-centeredness from our love. As Jesus, so ourselves. We learn real, loving obedience, when it is most difficult. The Letter to the Hebrews tells us that Jesus “learned obedience from what He suffered” (Hebrews 5:8). When we give of ourselves we learn who we really are, how generous

we are or how selfish we are, how charitable or how miserly. Yes, obedience proofs our love as gold and silver are proofed in the furnace.

3. Obedience does not make us into automatons. Obedience requires us to use our gifts of intellect and will, of nature and grace. Being obedient requires the use of skills we may have never known we possessed. Consequently, obedience helps us develop our skills and our gifts and talents. This is to say, that often times obedience sweeps us right out of our comfort zone -- like giving talks through the internet!
4. A fourth presupposition is that obedience is freeing. Let me repeat that: **obedience is freeing, liberating**, not binding or restrictive. If I do what I know to be right, what I perceive to be God's will, I do not have to worry about the outcome, if it is a success or a failure, because what matters is that I am faithful and obedient, not if I have grown in the esteem of others. I am also liberated in obeying God's will because I then put behind me my personal preferences to which I have allowed myself to become enslaved. What if I prefer to spend my Sundays outside, enjoying nature, even if it means missing Mass? However, every time I do, I end up miserable and feeling guilty. It is much more freeing to do God's will than to be enslaved to my selfishness.

Having thus established those presuppositions, I thought I was ready to address my topic; but, no, it seemed to me that I needed to state my premise, the very underpinning of my topic, that is, the foundation of Mary's obedience. To do so, I would like to begin by reading a few verses from the Letter to the Hebrews, chapter 10, which is quoting Psalm 40:

... it is impossible that the blood of bulls and goats take away sins.

For this reason, when he came into the world, he said:

"Sacrifice and offering you did not desire,

but a body you prepared for me;

holocausts and sin offerings you took no delight in.

Then I said, 'As is written of me in the scroll,

Behold, I come to do your will, O God."

(Hebrews 10:3-7)

The Second Person of the Trinity, in obedience to the Father, sharing one divine will with Him and the Holy Spirit, chose to be incarnated, to take on a human nature and, consequently, a human body. The Second Person of the Holy Trinity would become the Second Adam, the beginning of the re-created race of mankind. Scripture tells us that the first Adam and his wife Eve would walk in the Garden in the cool of the evening with their Creator, thus indicating the intimate and loving relationship between them and God. Their sin would change all of that.

The **matter** of the sin is not that important, ultimately it was a sin of disobedience that destroyed this relationship, causing them to hide in shame and not want to approach their loving Creator. In justice, the only way to repair this sin was through an act of obedience. Jesus Christ, Son of God and Son of Mary, would be the Obedient One.

We can clearly see through this that obedience is a fruit of love. God loves us and wants us to be in loving relationship with Him; He wants us to spend all eternity with Him in blessedness, in beatitude. The Second Person of the Blessed Trinity, loving His Father **and** mankind, freely chose to set aside, to empty Himself, for a time, of His glory in heaven and through obedience -- which encompassed His whole life -- regain for us the freedom and privilege of being children of God.

Jesus assumed a human nature -- and consequently, a human body -- to reveal to fallen man the love of God, the truth of God, to reveal to us the Father and the Spirit of Truth and Love. On the day of His crucifixion Jesus tells Pilate, "For this I was born and for this I came into the world, to testify to the Truth." (John 18:3-7)

Having testified through His words and His deeds to the Truth of God, and thus the Love of God, and having been rejected by the leaders of His own people, He would then take His obedience to the end. So, am I saying that God the Father willed the crucifixion of His Son? No, I am saying that God the Father willed that His Son be obedient ... and His obedience took Him to the cross. Looking at the Crucifix I should see Jesus' obedience, His love, not just His suffering. Obedience purifies our love; obedience is proof of our love. "If you love me, obey." If I love someone, I am going to make choices that please them; I am going to try to please them in everything I do.

Christ's obedience undoes the disobedience of Adam. In the Garden, Adam acted out of self-will and disregarded the manifested will of God. Jesus Christ gave up His own will and did the will of the Father. Did He not pray in the Garden of Gethsemane, "If possible let this cup pass from me. But not my will, but yours be done"? His obedience is absolute because His love is absolute.

Just a short moral theology lesson here:

The virtue of obedience is a moral virtue connected with the virtue of justice, which, simply stated is giving one what is his due. The virtue of obedience is giving God what is His due. Interesting ... because that puts the virtue of obedience in the realm of theological virtue with faith, hope and love. Obedience is so connected with faith (we obey because we believe that God is God and is therefore worthy of my obedience), with hope (we obey because we hope that God's promises to us will be fulfilled, i.e., heaven) and with love (we obey because we love Him and want to please Him in all we do) that we can't disconnect obedience from God. It is a theological virtue because it comes from God and takes us immediately back to God. Obedience is not only concerned with the means -- being obedient to complete a task -- but with the end, God Himself. Obedience unites us to God, our will with His will. When I am teaching the young Sisters, I will often say, "Obedience is not about submission -- we are not servants of our superiors -- but about union, union with God, willing what God wills, doing what God desires." The truest and deepest meaning of religious obedience is union with God. Obedience takes me directly to the one I am obeying, God Himself because it fulfills His will and God's will is God Himself.

Taking a quick look at the passage from Hebrews that I read in the beginning:

... it is impossible that the blood of bulls and goats take away sins.
For this reason, when he came into the world, he said:
"Sacrifice and offering you did not desire,
but a body you prepared for me;

holocausts and sin offerings you took no delight in.

Then I said, 'As is written of me in the scroll,

Behold, I come to do your will, O God.'"

God desires obedience not animal sacrifice. The clincher is that in desiring obedience, God is desiring sacrifice ... the **sacrifice of our wills**. To imitate Jesus, to deny ourselves daily and pick our cross, is to do God's will in all things, setting aside those things which I would seek for comfort, ease, convenience or pleasure. These aren't Gospel words. What are Gospel words? Charity, truth, self-denial, compassion, almsgiving of time and talent ... and all of these require obedience.

Knowing this why would we **want** to disobey? Well, sadly, because we are still fallen human beings with Adam and Even and have a difficult time placing God's will before our own.

There was one human person, though, who did not have this problem; one human person whose intellect was not clouded and whose will was not weakened by sin. Mary. The obedience of the Second Person of the Blessed Trinity enabled the perfect obedience of Mary. Her Immaculate Conception was God's unique gift to her, personally, but it was also a gift to us. By removing all obstacles to her reception of God, He opened the door to redemption for all sinners.

Through the graces of her Immaculate Conception, Mary never even desired anything contrary to God's will. She may not have understood everything, but she placed her own intellect and will at the service of God. She was able, without any hurdles, to unite her will to His in every situation and circumstance. Sounds like heaven, doesn't it? Literally.

And so, when the fullness of time arrived, Mary was ready. In fact, she was an essential element to the fullness of time. Unhindered by sin, Mary was able to completely and freely dedicate herself mind, soul, and virginal body to God at a very young age. Thus, with the fullness of time, God responds to her gift of self with a proposal and sends St. Gabriel to the Virgin of Nazareth. St. Gabriel asks Our Lady if she will become the Mother of God. Mary's only question is "how?" How can a virgin become a mother? The angel's answer was simple ... God

can do it; she doesn't have to do anything but agree and receive. With that Mary says "yes." In fact, her answer was "amen," "fiat."

Let me point out here a beautiful exchange of gifts between God and Our Lady:

God gives her the gift of sinlessness in her Immaculate Conception.

Mary responds with the total gift of herself to Him; giving Him her virginity, and thus her motherhood.

God then gives her a proposal to become the Mother of God, thus returning to her her motherhood within her vowed virginity.

Mary responds with her "fiat," her "yes" to whatever God asks of her.

God then gives the gift of the Incarnation -- the greatest event of all human history -- and God becomes man, incarnate in the womb of a virgin.

Mary then gives Him her life-long participation in His mission of redemption from the Annunciation to the Crucifixion and beyond as Mother of the Church and our Queen in heaven, continuing her saving mission as advocate.

The blessings of obedience are becoming clearer and clearer!

Specifically looking at Mary's obedience we can immediately see that the parallel pointed out earlier encompasses Mary as well. As Jesus is the New Adam, Mary is the New Eve. Eighteen centuries ago, St. Irenaeus wrote,

In parallel, the virgin Mary too is obedient when she says, "Behold, I am the servant of the Lord, be it done to me according to your word." ... Just as Eve, by an act of disobedience became the cause of death for herself and the whole of mankind, so Mary by an act of obedience became the cause of salvation for herself and for the whole of mankind. (Adv Haer. III, 22,4)

Because of her "fiat," Mary is said to be the "living icon of obedience." She not only observed, witnessed and imitated the obedience of Jesus, she also **lived**, participated, in His obedience with Him. (See Raniero Cantalamessa, *Obedience*, 69).

Since the first Scriptural reference to Mary's "fiat" is at the Annunciation, it would serve us well to give that account some special attention.

In the sixth month, the angel Gabriel was sent from God to a town of Galilee called Nazareth, to a virgin betrothed to a man named Joseph, of the house of David, and the virgin's name was Mary. And coming to her, he said, "Rejoice, O highly favored one! The Lord is with you." But she was greatly troubled at what was said and pondered what sort of greeting this might be. Then the angel said to her, "Do not be afraid, Mary, for you have found favor with God. Behold, you will conceive in your womb and bear a son, and you shall name him Jesus. He will be great and will be called Son of the Most High, and the Lord God will give him the throne of David his father, and he will rule over the house of Jacob forever, and of his kingdom there will be no end." But Mary said to the angel, "How can this be, since I do not know man?" And the angel said to her in reply, "The holy Spirit will come upon you, and the power of the Most High will overshadow you. Therefore the child to be born will be called holy, the Son of God. And behold, Elizabeth, your relative, has also conceived a son in her old age, and this is the sixth month for her who was called barren; for nothing will be impossible for God." Mary said, "Behold, I am the handmaid of the Lord. May it be done to me according to your word." Then the angel departed from her. (Luke 1:26-38.)

God had a proposal for Mary. He asked her, through the Angel Gabriel, "Will you be the Mother of My Son?" With this question the All-powerful God, Creator of all, respects His own creation and honors our dignity; He places Himself in need of a collaborator. At the same time, in the words of Pope St. John Paul II, God "put the destiny of all mankind in this young woman's hands" (JPII, *Theotokos*, 137). St. Bernard, whose great love for Our Lady is expressed eloquently in His writings and in His sermons, describes the scene, saying: "all creation held its breath waiting for her reply."

Because she had never refused God anything, through the graces of her Immaculate Conception, she is here again able to respond with a complete unhesitating response. She had

thoroughly cooperated with all the graces offered her and now, even though she did not understand how this could be, she placed all her trust in Him and said, “Fiat, yes, ... I am all yours, do with me what you will.” This is true obedience of faith. She believed in God, she trusted Him, she, in one sense, could not, not obey. Her beliefs had a direct influence on her life. Her faith directed all of her decisions. Previously, she had followed an inspiration from God to vow virginity. Now, He asks her to be a mother. She does not understand, but she accepts. “Fiat” is the word of her heart. She has so completely given herself to God she **cannot** accept His proposal.

We can see with **our** eyes of faith, how Mary’s was a life of total obedience: no hesitation, no qualification, no checking the terms of the contract. Simply, with great trust and with purity of heart, she says, “Fiat.”

Her only question was “how?” In other words, she asked what she needed to do to bring this about. How could she, a virgin, become a mother?

Even when the Angel Gabriel explained she could not possibly have immediately and fully comprehended the full impact of the Incarnation. Remember, up to this point there was no concept of a Triune God and yet the angel’s explanation contained words such as “the Holy Spirit” and “Son of the Most High.” And still there is trust and acceptance. She placed her entire self at His disposal: her intellect, her will, her body. Everything was His to do with as He willed. It is interesting to note that though the English translation of this Greek text uses the word “handmaid”, the original Greek says “slave.” Mary identifies herself as God’s slave. A servant works certain hours of the day for pay and then returns to home and family. A slave, on the other hand, is the property of the master, to be at his beck and call; literally, Mary willingly recognizes herself as belonging to God as His possession to do with what He wills. She abandoned herself to a mystery because she knows the One proposing is trustworthy. With the mention of Elizabeth’s pregnancy, she is confirmed in her belief that nothing is impossible with God.

The Fiat is the pivotal moment of fidelity ... Mary cannot comprehend everything, but she accepts the mystery and gives it a place in her heart; she pondered it in her heart and she

abandons herself to the mystery with the availability of one who opens herself to be inhabited by Someone greater than herself.

Mary's perfect "yes" spoken to God is the avenue through which our Redeemer was welcomed into the world. Her faith enabled her to trust in His plan. Her obediential yes changed the history of the world. Her yes, her fiat, proves her union with the Divine Will. She was, in fact, "in total obedience to the saving will of God expressed in the Angel's words" (JP II, 137).

Mary's obedience can be summarized with the Annunciation account, but that extraordinary moment was in no way the sum total of her obedience. Mary lives her fiat throughout her life; every single time she is mentioned in the Gospels and in the Acts of the Apostles, Mary is demonstrating an obediential attitude. It wouldn't take long to discover that for yourself. Mary's obedience is the antithesis of Eve's disobedience. Eve was the mother of all the living, but her motherhood brought death to her children. Mary is mother in the order of grace, opening the portal of our salvation.

So, now, how does all of this apply to us? How does the fact that fiat is the word of Mary's heart affect us? How can that help us on our own spiritual journey, our path to holiness?

Pope St. John Paul II answered our question; he wrote, "By her conduct, Mary reminds each of us of our serious responsibility to accept God's plan for our lives" (JP II, 137). Don't we already pray this? Every day in the Lord's Prayer we echo Mary's fiat and Jesus' fiat; we say, "Thy will be done on earth as it is in heaven." 'Thy will be done in me, here today, always. May I never oppose myself to Your holy will. I am all yours to dispose of, to use, according to Your will, to fulfill Your holy plan. Fiat.'

St. Thomas Aquinas says in the Summa, "Mary uttered her yes in the name of all human nature." If she had not said fiat, we could not say fiat. She has already said yes, and consequently the victory could be won by Jesus, according to His divine, eternal plan. Now let us say our fiat with hers, let us unite our fiat with hers.

Why? Because God proposes still. He has a plan in which we all have an instrumental part to play. We are part of a bigger picture. We should never make our decisions thinking only of our selves. Everything we do has consequences. Everything we do affects others. More than that, we should act according to God's will because that is what will make us happiest and holiest. He knows how to make us happy and He knows how to make us holy. Yes, God makes proposals to each of us. We, too, have to say "yes, fiat," even when we don't understand; we have to make ourselves completely available to God's holy will, trusting that He knows best and He wants the best for each of us. **Often times, it is only after we say yes and accept His proposal that we can begin to understand.**

To respond in this way is to respond in a Marian manner.

One of my favorite quotes from one of my favorite people, Cardinal Ratzinger, Pope Emeritus Benedict XVI, goes like this: "To be 'devoted to the Immaculate Heart of Mary' ... means to embrace the attitude of heart which makes the fiat the defining center of one's whole life."

Our devotion must change our lives. If we are truly devoted to the Immaculate Heart of Mary we cannot carry on status quo, we must "embrace the attitude of heart which makes the fiat the defining center" of our lives. Fiat is the word of Mary's Immaculate Heart; may it also be the word of our hearts.

Think again of Mary. At a very early age the Lord inspired her to give herself to Him entirely and unreservedly. He inspired her to vow her virginity in a time when it was shameful to be childless. She did so, trusting that He who had inspired her to do so would take care of her. She was set on that path.

Then came the troublesome greeting of the Archangel. She who gave her maternity to the Lord was given it back in a way incomprehensible. Her path now took her through different scenery. Yes, a virgin, but now, also a mother. To be able to follow the unexpected nature of God's manifest will, Mary had to be docile. She had to be ready to change her way of thinking and see the hand of God. Yes, with God's intervention, she could be both virgin and mother.

Mary's response was perfect. We will never encounter such a proposition; we will never be asked to give God a human nature! She was prepared from the first moment of her

existence and in her purity she was able to respond selflessly through the graces offered her. It follows then that the purer our heart is, the better we will be able to imitate her and live her fiat. A pure heart is an undivided heart. As pure gold has no alloy, so a pure heart has no clutter, no divisions. It is all God's. The more we purify our hearts the more in tune we will be to God's holy will, the more perfectly we will respond with our fiat.

Yes, Mary's response was perfect; Mary is the perfect and first disciple. Her response is the model for ours. I am not venturing too far out by saying that truly to be Christian is to be obedient. To be Christian is to be a follower of Christ; to be Christian is to be like Christ. Christ is the Obedient One; Mary, the perfect Christian, is the icon of that obedience. No. We cannot be Christian unless we are obedient. Either Jesus is our Lord or He is not. Either I am obedient or Jesus is not my Lord.

I do want to reiterate a point I made in the beginning; obedience is not so much about submission -- Jesus Himself said, "I no longer call you servants but friends" (John 15:15) -- as it is about a loving relationship, union and even "likeness". To be like Christ, to imitate Him is to be His true and faithful, loving companion. And since obedience is about union with the Lord it is about holiness.

Obedience is not easy; no one ever said it would be. In fact, my patroness, St. Bernadette once wrote in her private retreat notes, "obedience must be crucifying." It was for Jesus, so it will be for His faithful followers.

I dare say that we have all had an extra dose of practicing obedience these last few months, in ways which we never dreamed. Though I don't understand it all, I don't have to. Mary didn't understand everything while it was happening either. What I am 100% certain of is that God is pleased with our obedience. Loving obedience, crucifying as it is, is the key to God's heart, the key to heaven. Mary exemplified this for us; she will always show us the way.

As a Sister of the Immaculate Heart of Mary, "fiat" is the word I try to personify. Mary's fiat is a constant meditation, for "Fiat" is the word of Mary's Immaculate Heart. "Fiat" defines her existence. "Fiat" formed her entire being. "Fiat" was her predisposition. Living Mary's fiat

means to take what is set before us. Whatever God sends or permits, I accept from His hands, asking for nothing, refusing nothing. There is great holiness in this.

Yes, “fiat” is the word of Mary’s Immaculate Heart. I hope and pray that this will one day be true for me and for each of us, for this is truly the way to heaven. I may never in this life be gifted with the highest mystical prayer of union, but I can still enjoy union with my God through my union of wills with His.

Union of wills with God is the ONLY way to heaven. We must be united in will with Him. We must want what He wants, love what He loves, do what He does, and judge as He judges. Granted, we are not immaculate conceptions like Mary, so our fallen human nature will, at times, revolt; we will fall, we will fail, we will break our resolutions... but we have the wonderful sacrament of Confession. Though we do not always do what we want to do, and often do what we do not want to do, paraphrasing St. Paul, we must always strive to will what God wills – to maintain union of wills.

We cannot go to heaven willing what God does not will and not willing what He does will.

With His grace all things are possible; He will undoubtedly and undeniably **always** give the grace to do His will, to be obedient. Let us pray for that ... for ourselves and each other as we now pray our novena prayer.