

Prayer

June 7, 2024



Pondering in Mary's Heart

The *Catechism of the Catholic Church* is comprehensive and divided into four parts. In these four sections, it teaches us what we believe, then moves on to the sacraments of faith, then the life of faith, and, lastly, the prayer of the believer (CCC, 13). This in itself teaches us that with the Creed, the liturgy, and the moral life, prayer is essential to our life as Christians. It must, therefore, be worthy of our continued attention. How fitting it is then, that this year be a year dedicated by our Holy Father, to prayer.

We know that Jesus, Who is God, hears our prayer, attends to our prayer, enters into communion with us in our prayer. Yet here we are confronted with a paradox: not only does He receive our prayer; we also know that Jesus prays.

Amongst the occurrences and examples the Gospel writers give us, they speak of Him going off by Himself to spend the night in prayer, that He prayed for the apostles before He called them to Himself and then sent them out, and He prayed for Peter the night before the crucifixion that his faith be strengthened so that He could then, in turn, strengthen the faith of the other apostles.

It seems a little puzzling to us that Jesus prayed; after all, He's God. Yes, but He is the Word-made-Flesh, a Divine Person with a human heart. He prayed. Surprisingly enough, the *Catechism* also tells us that Jesus had to **learn** how to pray. It reads such, simply stating: "The Son of God who became Son of the Virgin learned to pray in his human heart" (CCC, 2599).

That is a mystery! The Word of God who condescended to become a creature, but who never left His Father, was never separated from Him or the Holy Spirit, had to learn, in His human nature, how to commune with the Father. This profundity raises a blaring question! **Who** could teach Jesus, the Son of God made the Son of Man, how to pray?

Thank goodness for the *Catechism*! Continuing with the same article of the *Catechism* I cited earlier, we read that Jesus learns to pray, not from the rabbi, not from Joseph, but that "He **learns to pray from His mother**" (CCC, 2599).

He learns how to pray from Mary!

Well, if she is good enough for Jesus, she is certainly good enough for me!

There is a simple prayer made famous by Archbishop Fulton Sheen which begins and ends with the verse:

Lovely Lady dressed in blue ---

Teach me how to pray!

God was just your little boy,

And you know the way.

Tonight, we are going to ask her this exact same thing. “Lovely Lady dressed in blue, teach us how to pray.”

So how did Mary pray? Well, I don’t think that we are here speaking of the Jewish traditions or their public prayer. Here we are talking about Mary’s personal prayer. That is the secret, that is the key.

Once more going to the *Catechism*, we again look at that same article: “The Son of God who became Son of the Virgin learned to pray in His human heart. He learns to pray from His mother,” and then the last part says, “who **kept** all the great things the Almighty had done and **treasured** them in her **heart**” (CCC, 2599).

Twice in the second chapter of Luke’s gospel we hear reference to this. In the account of Jesus’ birth after the visit of the shepherds, Luke concludes by saying “Mary treasured all these things, pondering on them in her heart” (Luke 2:19). And then after the absence of the Child Jesus for three days, when Mary and Joseph found Him in the Temple, Luke again concludes by saying, “His mother kept all of these things in her heart” (Luke 2:51).

I find it helpful to look at the origin of words, it gives a deeper understanding of what is actually meant. For instance, consider the word “kept.” The dictionary says our English word “kept” could mean anything from “saved,” “reserved,” or “held back”. I guess it could mean anything from saving a piece of pie for later to flunking or failing a grade in school!

Looking at the Greek word we can be more precise. What does it mean that Mary “**kept** all of these things in her heart”? Our English translation uses the word “kept” for two different Greek words. The first of those words means “to keep close together,” “to conserve or to remember;” the second of those two words means, “to watch” or “to observe”. Recall what the *Catechism* says: Mary “kept all the great things the Almighty had done and treasured them in her heart.” She’s keeping them together, meaning she is letting the great things of the Almighty shed light upon

each other, explain each other, show the fulfillment and the reality ever ancient and now, in her lifetime and with her cooperation, ever new.

The meaning of these verses becomes even richer when we look at the phrase, “and she pondered them ...” The Greek word which is here translated as “to ponder” means “to bring together, to connect, to combine.” She’s not just thinking or considering. She has moved into the realm of prayer, contemplative prayer.

And then we have the word “treasured.”

She treasured – i.e., protected, held precious, cherished, prized in her heart, the remembrances of the great works of God. She is pondering, weighing them against each other, contemplating a deeper meaning than that which meets the eye, seeing or realizing their connection and wondering at the marvels of God and His great love for us. The salvation of mankind, through the enmity foretold from the beginning of time between the “woman,” who she is now realizing herself to be, and Satan, is being fulfilled before her eyes. She has plenty to ponder! The prophecies, the great promises of the Old Covenant, are being fulfilled now, beginning with her.

I would like to read a quote from Venerable Bede, one of our great Catholic scholars from the late seventh and into the eighth century.

Now she saw that she herself, who had arisen from the stock of Jesse, had conceived God’s Son of the Holy Spirit.

She had read in the prophet, “A shoot will sprout from the root of Jesse, and a ‘Nazarene’ will ascend from his root, and the Spirit of the Lord shall rest upon him.”

She had read, “And you, Bethlehem Ephratha, are a little one among the thousands of Judah. Out of you will come forth for me the one who is ruler in Israel, and his coming forth is from the beginning, from the days of eternity.”

She saw that she had given birth in Bethlehem to the Ruler of Israel, who was born eternal from the Father, God before the ages.

She saw that she had conceived as a virgin, and given birth to a son, and called his name Jesus.

She had read in the prophets, “Behold, a virgin will conceive and give birth to a son, and his name will be called Immanuel.”

She had read, “An ox recognizes its owner and an ass its master’s manger.”

She saw the Lord lying in a manger, where an ox and an ass used to come to be nourished.

Mary was comparing these things which she had read were to occur with those which she recognized as already having occurred. (Bede, as quoted in *Ancient Christian Commentary on Scripture, New Testament III, Luke*, edited by Arthur A. Just Jr., page 42-43)

I can't imagine the depth of her ponderings. How would one feel in recognizing oneself in these prophecies given to the Chosen People? I simply can't imagine it.

Yes, she pondered, she had much to ponder. Her pondering, I would wager to guess, would be much different than ours. Her intellect and will were unaffected by sin ... not clouded, not weakened. Her understanding of God's words and ways would have been, in fact, are, vastly different than any other creature's understanding and yet, she had to ponder. These events, these "things" as Scripture calls them, were mysterious.

Mysteries are not something that we are unable to understand. Mysteries are something we come to understand more and more fully as we take them to study and prayer; yet we will never **fully** grasp them. To fully understand the things of God we would have to be infinite as God is infinite, all-knowing as God is all-knowing.

Thus, "to ponder" doesn't mean that she didn't understand and had to think everything through, making diagrams and charts. She pondered because the words and events had meaning of infinite depth, a meaning incapable of being fully grasped, understood or mastered. We must never limit God to what we can understand about Him and His ways.

Nor was Mary just remembering these great events. She wasn't committing these things to memory as if she were studying for an exam. What is actually being described here is very profound. One image that comes to mind is a hen gathering her chick under her wings to keep and protect them from danger. Another image is of a sacred vessel used at Mass to hold the Consecrated Elements. She is allowing herself to become a coffer or a safe in which to protect these treasured and valuable items. Yes, she has become a vessel that will hold, guard, and preserve the mighty works of God, so as to be able to reveal them in integrity and truth when He ordains.

Let me again quote Venerable Bede:

Abiding by the rules of virginal modesty, Mary wished to divulge to **no one** the secret things which she knew about Christ. She reverently waited for the time and place when **he would** wish to divulge them. However, though her mouth was silent, in her careful, watchful heart she weighed these secret things. And this is what the Evangelist says, pondering in her heart – indeed, she weighed those acts which she saw in relation to those things which she

had read were to be done. ... Nevertheless she did not bring these things forth from her mouth but kept them closed up in her heart. (Bede, as quoted in *Ancient Christian Commentary on Scripture, New Testament III, Luke*, edited by Arthur A. Just Jr., page 42-43)

She pondered them in her heart, in her Immaculate Heart, in her Heart enlightened and full of grace. So here is one more key word to add to the mix: heart. As I said earlier, her heart is sinless, which makes it very different than ours, but definitely how we want our hearts to be, more and more. With sin and all of its effects, our hearts are divided, impaired and clouded; hers is free, free to be all His, it is unimpaired and unclouded.

In Scripture the heart has many functions: it is the seat of our memory, the home of our intellect, and the home of our free will, the superior part of our soul, the root of our good and our evil deeds. "Heart" is understood to refer to the highest part of the soul which turns us directly to God, thus the heart is a signification of our whole interior life, the core of our being.

Our heart reveals who we really are.

The more our hearts resembles Mary's, the more sinless they are, the more we can learn to pray like Mary. The moral life and prayer are intimately intertwined.

In these few words from Scripture, twice used by St. Luke in the second chapter of his gospel, we learn a great deal about Our Lady. The commentary in the Navarre bible demonstrates this. Quoting that commentary on the Gospel of Luke:

We see the serenity with which she contemplates the wonderful things that are coming true with the birth of her divine Son. She studies them, ponders them and stores them in the silence of her heart. **She is a true teacher of prayer.** If we imitate her, if we guard and ponder in our hearts what Jesus says to us and what he does in us, we are well on the way to Christian holiness and we shall never lack ... his grace. (The Faculty of Theology of the University of Navarre, *The Navarre Bible: St. Luke*, page 56)

So now, let us consider the ways of Mary through the advice of Venerable Bede:

Consider the most prudent woman Mary, mother of true Wisdom... She dwelt in meditation on his words and actions. Nothing of what was said or done by him fell idly on her mind. As before, when she conceived the Word itself in her womb, so now does she hold within her his ways and words, cherishing them as it were in her heart. That which she now beholds in the present, she waits to have revealed with greater clarity in the future.

As she saw the full revelation of what was previously prophesied, learning thus their deeper meaning, she also knows that what she currently sees and hears will be

made known more fully in the future words and deeds of Jesus. Ven. Bede concludes:

This practice she followed as a rule and law through all her life. (Bede, as quoted in *Ancient Christian Commentary on Scripture, New Testament III, Luke*, edited by Arthur A. Just Jr., page 55)

That rule and law of her life is what we want to learn from her, who is the true teacher of prayer; we do want to imitate her, treasuring within our own hearts what Jesus says and does to us and in us. Truly, learning to ponder as did Mary may be the most important practice Our Mother can teach us. How can we do this? When we learn to reflect upon the milestones of life and the daily events, when we ponder God's action in each of these, we begin to see how, as Scripture says, "all things work for good for those who love God" (Romans 8:28).

Allowing God's light to shine upon the words, the encounters and the events of the day enables us to see all things through the perspective of eternity. As the great saint, St. Bernadette, once said, "**All is good for heaven.**" Reflecting, i.e., pondering, enables us to see that.

You know – and this is not a divergence or a tangent – what I think one of the great evils of our time is? How the devil has tricked us all? How he keeps us from pondering as Mary did? I am **not** saying it is the **only** or the **greatest** evil, but **one of the great evils** of our time is **busy-ness**. We have such a multitude of time saving devices from washing machines and microwaves to social media with internet and snap chat, **that we don't have any time**. We are running from place to place trying to keep up with the demands of our lives and we don't have time to wonder, to think, to ponder, in a word, to pray and to appreciate the great works of the Almighty, His mysterious ways and marvelous deeds.

Perhaps, on occasion, we need to walk away from the explosion of activity and noise so we can reflect upon what God is asking of each of us right now, what He desires for each of us right now, and what He is doing in each of our lives right now. Because **He is** asking something of us right now, **He is** desiring something for each of us right now, **He is** acting in our lives right now. And, most assuredly, He desires to be more present to each of us on a daily basis.

The first and essential means to praying like Mary is to create the space within ourselves to do so.

How this will happen is going to be tailor made for each of us. I am not suggesting major changes in your lives, just small ones, small adjustments that create space. Perhaps it would simply mean asking the Lord what He wants you to do each day, how He wants you to spend your time. Give it all to Him and let Him sort it all out. The catch is that we have to be willing to make the accommodations.

If we don't create this space, how will we ever be able to notice what God is doing in our lives? How will we ever be able to understand how He desires to draw us closer and closer to Himself? How he has designs on us and for us? How He loves us? That, basically, is why we need space, time and yes, even some quiet, we need to be able to hear God tell us how much He loves us. Prayer is not a time-consuming activity; it is a living relationship. We make time for those we love; we make time for what we love; we make time for those who love us.

To create this space and time within us, perhaps we need to ask ourselves some difficult questions – and not just ask, but again be willing to make adjustments as we realize the answers. Perhaps we need to ask ourselves questions such as these: Which of the virtues are really being tested right now? What graces do I need right now? How will I fight an on-going temptation? Is my spiritual resolution working? Do I even **have** a spiritual resolution? What activities keep me from prayer time and spending quiet time with God? What brings me closer to Him? Do I pay attention to the beauty in my life and give God the glory? If I were at the end of my life, what would I wish I had done differently about this situation? What am I spending time doing so that I can be in control of that situation; how can I relinquish that? Where must I trust God more and myself less?

The content of our daily lives is what God has given us to grow in holiness, in love, in virtue. What are we doing with it? Are we seeing the mundane in the light of eternity? How can the different aspects of our lives be used to grow in holiness? Difficult days should be seen for what they really are: gifts from God to be returned to Him as a sacrificial gift of love and fidelity. Interruptions. Interruptions do not hinder us from doing God's will. Interruptions are a manifestation of His will for us in that moment! He has allowed it for the sake of my greater holiness. Paying attention to that interruption is God's will for me right then.

If we don't stop and reflect, we miss all of this and the treasure, the sacrament of the moment, can slip away.

Like Mary, let us reflect upon the events of each day. Find God in them. Keep them in our memory – our hearts – without many words. **Be amazed** at **how** He tells you each day how much He loves you. He is not asking great and dazzling achievements from us, He is asking us to wait for Him in the silence of our hearts, to receive Him there and to respond to Him, to discover Him in the people and activity of your own life and realize with joy that God shows Himself precisely in the small things of daily life.

Mary lived a simple hidden life, primarily caring for her family. She found God in and through those activities, her duties did not distract her from Him nor did her attention on God lessen her attention to her duties. She integrated her life and prayer; she did not try to separate them, creating a false dichotomy.

I guess what I am trying to describe is a change in attitude or perspective. We cannot eliminate all of the busy-ness of our lives, but we can approach it differently, with a different mind-set. The scripture passages we have been looking at culminate at the same high point. These treasures were not just memories, or facts to record like phone numbers and addresses. She didn't need a phone with a calendar, a contacts page, and a camera. These treasures were immeasurably more valuable than any of that ... hence she kept them where we keep our treasure, in our heart.

When we can see and hear in our day the activity and voice of God, when we can find Him in every situation, circumstance and person we encounter, when we can speak to Him there and hear Him there, then we are beginning to pray like Mary. And as we grow in that practice, we will have treasure of inestimable value to store in our own hearts.

So, with Mary, let us examine the events of each day with our hearts, not letting the turbulence of daily life take away from the meaning of those events, knowing that these are mysteries and will not be fully understood, but realizing that somehow in some way, everything will eventually serve God's purpose. **His ways are always good. His ways are always loving.** Sometimes the disguises are pretty good, but nonetheless God is with us. Remember, what I quoted earlier from the Letter to the Romans: "**all things** work for good for those who love God" (Romans 8:28).

But we have to let it do so.

No matter what happens, we will always have Jesus. No matter what happens, He will always love us. No matter what happens, we know that everything somehow fits into God's divine and loving providence.

Undoubtedly, all the events of our life can be considered in the light of eternity, and in this light, we can come to treasure them for their true worth, **that they are our way to heaven.** Keeping, pondering, and treasuring as Mary did will bring us to a deeper knowledge of her Son ... which is what we want, for to know Him is to love Him and to know Him more intimately and deeply is to be able to love Him more intimately and deeply. As we treasure in our hearts His marvelous works in our own life we will be drawn into closer union with Him.

Deep down, whether we can put it into words or not, this is what we all desire. We were made for Him and only He can fulfill our hearts. Accordingly, then, let us ask Our Mother, right now, with all the fervor we can muster, "Lovely Lady, dressed in blue, teach us how to pray!"

May this be our intention as conclude and fly once more to the aid of Our Mother, "Remember, O Most Gracious Virgin Mary ..."