



## *The Immaculate Heart of Mary*



## The Rose of Humility

June 21, 2025



Welcome to the 3<sup>rd</sup> night of our Novena to the Immaculate Heart of Mary. This year during the novena, we are considering the Immaculate Heart of Mary, using the badge of the Immaculate Heart of Mary that the Sisters wear as a guide. What do the different parts of the heart symbolize? I love speaking to little children about Mary's Heart, asking them, "What do you notice about Mary's Heart?" I'll walk around the group of children, and I'll show them the badge of the Immaculate Heart of Mary that I wear and ask, "What's on Mary's Heart? What do you notice?" One child will probably say, "It's on fire!" and we'll talk about Mary's burning charity. Then, there's always a little boy who notices, "There's a sword in Mary's Heart!" I'll ask them what that means, or why there's a sword in Mary's Heart. Usually, the children say something about how Jesus suffered. Then we can talk about how Mary suffered with Him. After that, I'll ask again, "What else do you notice?" Then they say, "There are flowers on Mary's Heart!" I'll ask, "How many flowers?" This is a great question, because no matter the grade level, they can always count to three. They see 3 flowers on Mary's Heart. Then I will ask, "What do you think the flowers represent?" That question stops them. They aren't so sure. **Why do we see flowers on Mary's Heart?** The children say all sorts of things. Depending on the age, some of them have already heard the answer, so they just rattle it off. But my favorite answer that a child has given is, "Mary is beautiful and roses are beautiful, so there should be roses on Mary's Heart."

Beauty. Let's consider beauty. When I see roses on the rose bushes, they attract my attention; I can appreciate this beautiful flower; I get a deeper satisfaction from appreciating their beauty, if I take the time to "stop and smell the roses." There is also a deeper beauty than mere physical beauty. I can say someone is a beautiful person because of her joyful and loving demeanor, which is deeper than her physical beauty. This deeper beauty has a certain presence, a radiance. The reason I like the child's answer—"Mary is beautiful, so there should be roses on Mary's Heart"—is because the roses depicted on Mary's Heart do represent something beautiful about the Heart of Mary; they represent her virtues, and virtues are beautiful. Virtues are the "flowering" or "blossoming" of God's life and grace at work in us. Virtues are the way that people reflect God's life and love in their daily life (*Catechism of the Catholic Church*, henceforth CCC, paragraph 1803), by their actions—so a person reflects God's beauty through virtue (CCC 1813, 1827). Let's take the example of Mother Teresa—Mother Teresa radiated God's life and love, through her virtues, which is what made her beautiful and attracted people to her.



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If we look at the Immaculate Heart that the Sisters wear, you'll notice there are three roses. According to the communal documents of the Sisters of the Immaculate Heart of Mary, the three roses represent Mary's three primary virtues—humility, obedience, and purity (IHM Directory). Tonight, our focus is going to be on that first virtue, **humility**. Later during the novena, you will hear about Mary's virtues of obedience and purity. Let us see how God's life radiates or shines through Mary—in a beautiful way—because of the virtue of humility.

We will begin with what humility is and what it looks like when lived to the full. Then, we will look at humility in the life of our Lady by examining the Annunciation. Once we see the beauty of Mary's humility at the Annunciation, then we will end by considering how Mary can help each of us grow in humility in our daily life. Let's begin with what humility is.

### **What is Humility?**

If we could imagine the virtues as a family, humility might be called the “black sheep” of the family. Why is it that whenever someone tells me they “prayed for humility,” they then seem to brace themselves as if waiting for God to smite them? Why do I do that when I pray for humility? How can a virtue that people seem to dread be a beautiful rose on the Heart of our Lady? Let's make sure we have the correct picture of humility.

St. Teresa of Avila is attributed with the famous and simple definition, “Humility is truth” (Frasier). Humility, then, can simply be seen as living in the truth—the truth of who God is, and the truth of who I am. What is a true picture of God? God is all-powerful, all-loving, all-wise, all-good. God is infinite and eternal. God is Creator and Lord, Savior and Sanctifier. He holds all things in existence. That is God. What is a true picture of myself? First, I am created by God; I would not even exist without Him. Everything I have comes from Him. Not only that, but He enables me to use those gifts. In sum, I am totally dependent on Him. I need Him. Also part of a true picture of myself is that I am limited, weak, fallen, and sinful. Yes, God has given me gifts and talents, but I am still limited. I cannot be everywhere and do everything, despite what society tries to tell me. I do not always know what is best. I have many faults and I am prone to sin. So, if humility is truth, I need both pictures to live humility—a true picture of God and a true picture of myself.

Now, that's knowledge in my head, but to really have the virtue of humility, that knowledge needs to move from my head to my heart. For me to be humble, I don't just know about God in my mind—all-powerful, all-loving, all-wise, all-good. Rather, I experience God and interact with Him in that way. A humble person, in his heart of hearts, experiences the truth of God's love, goodness, wisdom, and power. God is a good Father, who takes care of him in all the little details of his day. God's will or plan really **is** the greatest good; the humble person surrenders to that when things don't go his way. The humble person knows who God is and lives according to that truth.

Humility is also truth of self, lived in the heart, not just known in the head. I can know intellectually that I'm limited and dependent on God. I can know I have faults and sinful tendencies. However, living by that truth from the heart transforms the humble person's life. It requires knowing the truth of our littleness “deeply from... personal

experience” (Sri 181). A humble person knows he is limited, imperfect, and not the center of the universe. A humble person isn’t trying to impress anyone or trying to prove himself. He is not trying to control everything. He can admit when he is wrong because he knows he is limited. He can admit when another person has a better idea because he knows that he doesn’t actually know everything. We like being around humble people; they are a breath of fresh air in our self-centered culture.

Even though true humility is refreshing, attractive, and beautiful, why is it that people cringe when they say they “prayed for humility”? Why is humility the “black sheep” of the virtues? Because humility goes against our pride and our self-love. My ego has to die in order for me to be humble. And, you know, I like my ego! I like getting my way. I like being in control and being self-sufficient. I like being right. And I especially like it when other people know that I’m right and admit I’m right. You can just ask my mom; she’d be able to tell you plenty of stories of me growing up, and all the fights I had with my siblings because I “had to be right.”

See all of that pride and ego? Humility cuts it all down, so I cringe as I pray for humility. We don’t like humility because our sinfulness wants us to live in the **false reality** of our egos, where we get to call the shots and we have the answers; basically, where we get to be god. But the truth is, I’m not God. I was not made to live a self-centered or prideful life. When I am enslaved to that false reality of my ego, it actually makes me miserable. All of us probably have experienced it—prideful people are not happy, nor do they bring happiness to others. The great news is, the opposite is also true—humble people are happy, and they bring happiness to others.

Remember—virtues are the way that we radiate God’s life and God’s love. The virtue of humility is no different. It’s only when I start living in reality, in truth—I am not God, nor should I try to be—that I get to experience and to radiate the beauty, the freedom, the joy of humility. Dr. Edward Sri in his book on virtue describes the life of humility in this way, “The humble person... lives with no illusions. He’s not trying to be something he is not. While there may be greater souls who are smarter, more successful, and holier than he, the humble person is at peace accepting who he is and playing the role God has in store for him. The humble person accepts that he needs God’s help... [and] does not try to control everything... Instead, he surrenders his will to God’s plan. The humble person, therefore, is free—free to be himself, free from the restlessness that comes from never being content with who he is, and free from always straining to be someone he is not” (181).

This knowledge of self and of God—when lived to the full—creates a beautiful openness of heart. It creates a “radical receptivity,” wherein a person is willing to be led by God, to receive everything from Him. In short, on the practical level, true humility of heart causes me to surrender my littleness and limitedness to God’s greatness in total trust. This response is one of freedom and joy. I repeat: true humility—lived to the full—makes me free, because I surrender my littleness and limitedness to God’s greatness in total trust. Then, God can do amazing things through us. This is what we see lived so beautifully in the Heart of Mary.

So, we shouldn’t cringe in asking for humility. We should desire the freedom and the joy humility brings, and be willing to do the work necessary to cultivate it in our heart.

Next, we are going to look at humility in the life of Our Lady—using the Annunciation and Mary’s *fiat* to see the beauty of Mary’s humility. After looking at the humility of Her Heart, we will see how she can help us cultivate this beautiful virtue in our own hearts.

### **Our Lady’s Humility—The Annunciation**

In the Gospels, the first picture we have of Mary’s humility is the Annunciation—this is when the angel Gabriel appears to Mary to announce the birth of Jesus. In this passage, the announcement of Jesus’ birth is not the only focus. This episode is also the account of Mary’s call from God and her response to that call (Gadenz 41). Mary is called or invited to take on this role of Jesus’ Mother; she is not forced to do so, nor is she passively made part of God’s plan. And it is Mary’s humility which is the foundation of her “yes” to God’s will for her.

Let’s paint this picture of Mary’s call more clearly—Mary was a young woman betrothed to Joseph—so, legally married, but not yet living in his house (Gadenz 41). Mary was poor; she lived a very simple life in Nazareth. She was a faithful Jew, formed in the culture of the Jews—longingly waiting for God to fulfill His promises, to send the Messiah (Klimisch 27). From the description of her in the Gospel, we can gather she was prayerful—we are told many times of her “pondering” (see Lk 2:19, 2:51). So here you have a simple, prayerful young woman in a small town. On the day of the Annunciation, she was probably just going about her normal, daily routine. We don’t know exactly what she was doing—praying or working or walking—when the angel appears to her.

The appearance of an angel would be enough to clue you in that big things were happening. If an angel appears to you, he’s not generally just there to chat, you know? But beyond that, the language the angel uses in the announcement clues Mary in that this message is about the salvation of the Jewish people; this message is about the Messiah (Gadenz 41-45; Hahn and Mitch 105). All of the words and phrases the angel Gabriel uses in his announcement can be linked back to passages in the Hebrew Scriptures (our Old Testament) that predicted the coming of the Messiah. For any of you who are interested, just pick up a good commentary on Sacred Scripture and you’ll see the richness of the text. For our purposes here, it will suffice to say the angel uses all of these words and phrases to drive home one point—the salvation God has promised is here. It was as if he said to Mary, “Everything that your people have been waiting for is about to be fulfilled. God is sending His Messiah. And you, Mary, are called to have a role in His coming. You are the virgin prophesied by Isaiah (see Is 7:14). This is what God is asking of you. He is calling you to be the Mother of the Savior, Jesus.”

We don’t often enough consider how amazing it is, this call, nor do we consider that Mary was a real person who had to respond. Mary was acutely aware of the greatness of the gift God was offering to her—God was to become incarnate in her womb—and she felt keenly how unworthy she was to receive that gift. She didn’t know, beforehand, that God wanted that of her. She didn’t know that day when she woke up that she would be conversing with the angel. But how does Mary respond?—in humble obedience.

At the end of the whole episode, Mary says, “Behold, I am the handmaid of the Lord; let it be to me according to your word.” This moment is what Catholics commonly call

Mary's *fiat*, because the Latin word used, "fiat," is translated here "let it be," (*Bible RSVCE*, Lk 1:38) or in other translations "May it be done" (*Bible NABRE*, Lk 1:38) (see Hahn and Mitch 105).

Mary responds to God's call with *fiat*, may it be done to me. It is a response of both humility and obedience, but our focus tonight is the virtue of humility. How is this response one of humility? Let's remember—humility is the truth of who God is, and who I am in relation to God. Practically speaking, living that truth means surrendering my littleness to His greatness in trust. That is what we see Mary do here.

Humility is the truth of who God is. Here is God, Creator—all-powerful, all-knowing. He is the God of Israel, who faithfully cares for His people. This truth is how Mary experiences God, in her prayer and daily life. She loves Him and trusts Him. He draws people into His plan, and He is revealing to Mary her role in that plan. God is calling Mary.

Humility is also the truth of who Mary is. Mary calls herself God's handmaid, or His slave. Mary recognizes her lowliness. She is human, lowly, limited, but she has also placed herself at the service of God. Handmaid. She is asked to do something far beyond what she is capable of doing. But God has always cared for His people, and He will take care of Mary. Mary has given her life to God, and if He is asking her to do this, then He will also take care of the details of how she will do this.

The response of humility is one of surrender—Mary surrenders her littleness to God's greatness in trust, and says *fiat*. Let it be done to me, or may Your will be done in me. Mary didn't have to understand how it all was going to work. She didn't have to see the whole game plan. All she knew was God was asking and God would provide—that was enough for her. That is the response of humility. See how humility is simple? God is asking; that is all that matters. Because of who He is and because I know I can depend on Him, all I really need to know is what He is asking. Then, in humble obedience, I say yes. It's that simple—that doesn't make it easy, but it's simple. Mary lived with a humble heart, which we see by her response at the Annunciation—"Behold, I am the handmaid of the Lord. Let it be to me according to your word" (Lk 1:38, RSVCE) The beauty of her response helps us to see why her virtue of humility is depicted as a rose on her heart—a beautiful flowering of grace at work in her soul.

### **Growing in Humility in Our Daily Life**

Tonight, we have seen what true humility is, and how Our Lady lived that virtue so beautifully in her life. At the end of our consideration, I would like to offer one practical way to grow in humility, using Mary's humble response of *fiat* as our model.

The Annunciation was obviously a big moment, a big call, when Mary gave her *fiat*. However, it's not just in the "big calls" like our vocation that we can model Mary's humility in our response to God. Rather, we must make Mary's humility in her *fiat* the model of how we live our daily life, in the hidden, unspectacular, thousand things we do each day. Mary was only able to give her big "yes" at the Annunciation because she had spent her whole life—giving hundreds of daily, little "yes's." Think of it like basketball practice—why do teenagers spend hours of practice every day all week long to play one 45-minute game?

Because without all the practice, you won't play the game well. Our daily "practice" responding to all of these little "calls" from God with humility will actually prepare us to respond well to those big, life-changing calls.

One practical way the Sisters do this is by trying to live the phrase "I take what is set before me." We use this phrase, "I take what is set before me," to imitate Mary's *fiat* where she said, "Let it be done unto me." The way the Sisters live this is explained in the Constitutions of our community. "To seek only God's will—"I take what is set before me"—to accept **humbly and gratefully** whatever God sends or permits, is to do always the things that please the Father, who holds each one in His hand and shapes her in the likeness of Christ" (IHM Constitutions 32, emphasis added). Let's just focus on that phrase—humbly and gratefully. We accept "humbly and gratefully whatever God sends or permits." That is the way we can grow in humility, imitating our Lady. There are thousands of little ways we can practice "I take what is set before me" each day, accepting humbly and gratefully what happens to us; these are moments I surrender my littleness to God's greatness.

Here are some little examples, especially helping us deny our pride and ego, since our focus tonight is growing in humility.

I'm driving and encounter traffic that's stalled to a halt. "I take what is set before me." I can accept this with humility, and offer the sacrifice of being patient. I let God use this for His purposes.

I make a mistake. "I take what is set before me." Rather than being upset at myself and frustrated, I can accept that I am human and limited. Offer praise to God and move on, rather than get caught up in self.

I'm talking to another person. "I take what is set before me" accepting this person humbly and gratefully. Rather than focus on myself, impatiently waiting for my opportunity to speak, I try to focus on the other and listen.

I was wrong. "I take what is set before me." I admit it to the person I was working with, again, accepting my own limitations humbly and gratefully.

There are hundreds of other daily examples, but also bigger examples.

There are many life situations when we feel like we are asked to do something that is far beyond what we can handle—maybe a new responsibility at work, a new endeavor in the parish. Maybe a family crisis arises, and you don't know how you will be able to handle it. Let your response be—"I take what is set before me." In humility, surrender your littleness to God's greatness, as you trust Him to provide for you. This will likely take MANY acts of trust and humility, but with each one, we grow in that virtue and allow God to be God—the loving Father who will provide for us if we let Him.

With each of these, and so many other examples, we can practice "taking what is set before [us], accepting humbly and gratefully whatever God sends or permits." We let God be God, and accept our own limitations.

To conclude this evening, let's be brave and pray for the virtue of humility. We don't need to cringe; rather, let's see the beauty of humility lived in the life of Mary and see the freedom she possessed because of it. God was God; Mary was not. She was not trying to be in control. Rather, she was trying to listen, to do God's will. The rest, she left up to Him. Once she knew God was asking her something, she tried to do it to the best of her ability—not trying to impress anyone, not trying to be noticed. We can imitate that in our own life by striving to “take what is set before us, accepting humbly and gratefully whatever God sends or permits.”

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