

# **The Mother of Yes:**

## **Mary and the Meaning of Spiritual Maternity**

by Robin Maas (1996)

There is an exquisitely beautiful Marian prayer which, because it is so very familiar, we may easily overlook as the treasury of spiritual insight it actually is. Like a lovely miniature portrait, it is a prayer that captures--on a small canvas--the very essence of Mary's vocation to maternity--her divine election as Mother of the Messiah, Mother of God, Mother of the Church. It is also, I have been delighted to discover, equally a portrait of the vocation to which every Christian woman, no matter what her state in life, is called. The prayer I am referring to, as you might have guessed, is The Angelus.

The Angel of the Lord declared. . . and in this message to our Mother in the order of grace lies, I am convinced, the secret of feminine happiness--the meaning of spiritual maternity. So let us examine, phrase by phrase, the treasures of this prayer that we are meant to frame the day with--morning, noon and night. Let us together explore the mystery of Mary's maternity as a model for our own.

### **The angel of the Lord declared unto Mary, and she conceived by the Holy Spirit**

To speak of maternity (in any sense of the word) is, necessarily, to acknowledge the reality of paternity. Each one of these realities exists by virtue of its opposite. To become a mother there must also be a father, or vice versa. And both of these states require a further, third reality--namely, offspring. The union of male and female-- these opposite but entirely complementary states of being--is designed to create new being, new life--a reality which shares in the characteristics of both father and mother but which ultimately transcends both parents, because it is entirely original. A new life always has its own integrity--and therefore its own "mission" to accomplish.

Paternal energy is, we know, active and initiating. It is "invasive" because it arrives from beyond the feminine body--and from beyond the feminine psyche as well.

Male sperm, scientists tell us, is in constant motion once it enters the woman's body. It behaves as if it has been sent on a mission; and it accomplishes its mission by setting life itself into motion--or on a mission.

At a time when the majority of women have come to think of pregnancy in terms of a "right"-- the right to be pregnant when we want to be and to thwart it when we do not--it is easy to lose sight of the reality that pregnancy is never simply a natural development of what is already there within the fertile woman. It always requires, at some level, an act of feminine consent--consent to be acted upon. Especially today, we can no longer speak of life as something that is bound to come. Despite feminist aspirations to total autonomy, that which is truly original--individual life in its total uniqueness--comes only from beyond us, from the agency of a masculine "other."

To speak of spiritual maternity is, likewise, to speak of the requirement of spiritual paternity. The arrival of new life in the Spirit for the believer requires an overshadowing that closely resembles that which the Blessed Virgin received. She who was "full of grace" yet needed to be mastered to bring forth the Way, the Truth, and the Life. And so, to speak of spiritual maternity is always to posit in a very direct way the active intervention of the Holy Spirit in the life of the individual Christian.

We know that the Holy Spirit is the Third Person of the Trinity. He is no less "God" than the Father and the Son. But the place he occupies in the Godhead makes him uniquely qualified to be the Lord, the Giver of Life; for the Spirit, we are taught, is the Personification of the unbreakable bond of perfect love that exists between the Father and the Son. He is Love in Person, the actual embodiment of the most powerful connection that has ever come into being. The Spirit is, in fact, a Divine Being who is a relationship, a Self that exists to unite because his very essence is union.

And so, the Spirit proceeds from the Father and the Son seeking always to unite. That is why we discover in the Holy Spirit a vital spiritual principle: namely, that loving union is always the precondition for new life. When union occurs, the Holy Spirit is there, fecundating that union, by breathing life into it. This principle, which I call the principle of union and fruitfulness is, I believe the key to understanding the unique feminine voca-

tion: that all women are called to union with the Lord and Giver of Life; and all women are meant to bear fruit from this union.

Throughout the last two thousand years, countless artists have desired to paint the Annunciation; and more often than not, they choose to depict Mary surprised at her prayers. The biblical text from Luke (1:26-38) says nothing about Mary praying or doing anything else for that matter. But this impulse or instinct to connect the angel's visit with prayer is profoundly true-- in the deepest sense of the word--because it is always the practice of prayer that renders us, first, fallow and, consequently, increasingly "fertile."

A fallow field is ground that has usually been previously plowed and harrowed (turned over and then leveled) but which remains unseeded. The land is set aside for a season, not because it is unnecessary, but precisely because its needfulness is foreseen. Fallowness is always in the service of future fruitfulness. It is a state of empty restfulness, of anticipation of future use.

In Mary's case, we are speaking of virginal soil, unplowed ground that has been set aside for one particular purpose and for no other. Mary's prayer is the prayer of perfect, virginal readiness to receive. It is a prayer that demands nothing yet asks for everything. And from absolutely beyond her comes the Word. The Creator of all life seeks this virgin soil in which to sow the seed of Salvation.

For the rest of us, the ground needs plowing before it is ready to receive. The fallowing of our soul through prayer and the harrowing or leveling of it through suffering will both purify and preserve it. The groaning of all creation under the plow of God is echoed in the unutterable groans of the Spirit within each fallow soul waiting to be sown; and the same Spirit who knows the Mind of God and the heart of every creature intercedes for us, prays in us, in our stead, as Scripture says, "with sighs too deep for words." (Rom. 8:26). In this way, through the prayer of the Spirit in us, we are wooed by an ardent but patient Lover.

This courtship, which is always a season of waiting and sometimes of tears and turmoil, will accomplish what it is meant to in replenishing the soul's otherwise scant moisture and killing off the toxic weeds that threaten to infest the soil that is our soul.

God's willingness to allow us to wait and to follow us with prayer reminds us that, by ourselves, we can bring forth nothing. The tilling, the time for sowing, and the season of harvest are all in hands other than our own.

It is no accident that the subject of prayer is of primary concern to women and that more women tend to involve themselves deeply (or superficially, for that matter) in the study and practice of prayer than do men. The object of prayer, strictly speaking, is not simply the bestowal of favors, but the achievement of union, of intercourse with the Divine. The person praying seeks to commune with God--initially perhaps to receive some desired good but ultimately to receive Him who is at the root of all desire, who is the only Good. As all women strive ceaselessly to develop connections that spring from the need to love, so the person praying is opening herself to union, even when she does not recognize her own need, her own desire.

**Behold the handmaid of the Lord,  
Be it unto me according to thy word**

The angel's salutation--Hail, Mary, full of grace--reveals that this young woman's state of virginal emptiness is in fact filled with pure possibility, with a transparent, unobstructed openness to life. He who is the Lord and Giver of Life--the One who is absolutely beyond her and other than herself--is fully present to her. And nothing but a word--hers--lies between the two of them.

Yet even where there are no obstacles to the action of grace, even where there is no sin, any intrusion of the supernatural into the natural order is profoundly unsettling. Mary, whom Luke the Evangelist describes as "disturbed" by the presence of the angel, is reassured by Gabriel:

Do not be afraid, Mary, for you have found favor with God. And behold, you will conceive in your womb and bear a son, and you shall call his name Jesus. He will be great, and will be called the Son of the Most High; and the Lord God will give to him the throne of his father David, and he will reign over the house of Jacob for ever; and of his kingdom there will be no end. (1:30-33).

The angel responds to Mary's natural puzzlement with the news that in order for this conception to take place, she must be "overshadowed" by the Holy Spirit. The Spirit's

paternity ensures that this child, too, shall be “holy.” (v. 34). Like Father, like Son. Mary will bear and bring forth God’s own holy and irrevocable Promise to Israel. Mary will be what every Jewish girl dreamed of being: the Mother of the Messiah.

Yes, she says. “Be it done unto me according to thy word.” The almost-woman, childlike soul surprised at her prayers says Yes and removes the only remaining constraint to the union God seeks. It is an entirely unqualified response to the divine wooing. Mary calls herself the “handmaiden (the little serving girl) of the Lord” (v. 38) and her Yes serves him as he both desires and deserves to be served--with total trust and self-surrender. She will be the Mother of Mercy, the Gateway between Heaven and earth. Mary is the Mother of Yes--of the One, the Apostle Paul says, in whom “all the promises of God find their Yes.” (2 Cor. 1:20)

Like Mary, we too should feel reassured that when God is ready to enter our lives in a new and direct way, it is a sign of an increase in his mercy and grace and no cause for fear; yet the invitation to union with the Divine is something to which we are almost always unable to give our immediate and unqualified assent.

The prospect of God’s full embrace does indeed generate fear before it generates hope; for an invitation to union always appears to put the future at risk by removing it out of our hands and placing it in the grip of Someone Else. We know that something new will be born; but we are not told its name--or its cost. We hope that it will delight; we fear that it will disappoint. And so we cannot give God an unqualified Yes. We retreat and say No, or we hedge our bets and say Maybe.

Thus it is possible to carry out a spiritual abortion. We do that when we fail to nurture the gifts the Spirit bestows upon us; when we hear a call from God and refuse to respond; when we choose to sin gravely and slay the tender shoot that has taken root in our soul. Such an act requires a kind of serious deliberation, of callous calculation, or desperation even, that many who consider themselves committed Christians probably lack. It is hard to slay the Spirit, the living breath of God within, without knowing what you are doing.

A much more likely and self-deceptive stratagem is contraception. Just as we have learned how to thwart physical procreation, we have devised numberless ways of keeping God at arms length and justifying ourselves while doing so. We seek to enjoy God's affection but prefer to escape his ardor; to find self affirmation without having to resort to self-surrender; to experience consolation in prayer without the irritation of self disciplined living; to settle for being good in place of striving to be holy.

We claim the right to decide when we are ready to conceive and bear fruit; and we certainly want to be the ones to say just how much fruit we are going to bear. And all because an unqualified Yes--Be it done unto me according to thy word--feels like dying. And it is. It is dying to the future I have planned for myself for the sake of a life that is not my own--but which will come through me.

So it is not enough to have the power of paternity available and waiting, as it were, at our beck and call. Spiritual maternity requires a readiness for what we could call "un-protected prayer"--that is, a total vulnerability to the initiatives God wants to take in our life. Without a taste for risk, a willingness to receive what is sent, we will remain spiritually complacent, in a state of sterility that will sadden and frustrate us without our ever recognizing the source of our own existential stagnation.

**And the Word was made flesh,  
and dwelt among us.**

Once the spark of life has been ignited within the womb, it then becomes the woman's job to put a body on it. The long slow work of gestation is woman's work entirely. She is the one to supply all the bodily nutrients that allow the developing fetus to reach viability. She gives of her own bodily substance that the new life may grow and thrive.

Gestation is a hidden work that nature designed to proceed in darkness and throbbing silence. Modern technology has uncovered many of the secrets of this miraculous process; yet this uncovering has not yet, at least, succeeded in truly illuminating the spiritually momentous portent of pregnancy. Even when a camera can monitor the growth of the fetus in the womb, there remains a willful blindness in many, including many women of childbearing age, in regard to what is actually going on. What the eye is meant to see and the mind to register is not the secret work of gestation itself but the effects of this on-

going enfleshment in the swelling girth of the woman who willingly undergoes this transformation of her own body for the sake a body not her own.

Of the many wonderful gifts Mary gave to her child, surely the most wonderful of all was the gift of her humanity--the gift that came from her body. When the Word became flesh, It was her flesh, her blood that he took for his own. Her humanity was the "one thing necessary" for the Logos to become Immanuel, God with us. So when Mary said Yes she was handing over to Another, not simply her heart but, in a very particular way, her body, her flesh and blood, her life, her breath. She was saying, in effect, "You may have this and every other part of me to use for your own purposes."

In the struggle to define itself and protect the pristine teaching of its Lord, the early Church developed criteria for distinguishing true teaching from false; and among these, the single most important was acceptance of the doctrine of the Incarnation--the full implications of which we are still discovering . Saint John the Evangelist warned his young community not to believe every spirit but to test each one, to measure all teaching against the astounding claim that "Jesus Christ [Salvation itself] has come in the flesh." (1 Jn. 4:1-2).

Mary, whose flesh Christ took for his own, and her ultimate significance to the Faith become all the clearer, then, when we realize that the Incarnation is the defining doctrine of Christian orthodoxy--the line drawn between the rock of truth and the shifting sands of falsity. It is no accident that in her very person, the Blessed Mother signifies ecclesial authenticity. What she offers is light for the mind, healing balm for the heart, and health for the body. What she offers is God in a body--the real, tangible thing. And she can offer us his body only because she first offered him hers.

In this gift of all she was, especially her bodily self, she exemplifies--she epitomizes--what is uniquely feminine in human nature. And it is precisely this revelation of the feminine that is now under attack--by women themselves.

Modern western woman, raised in a largely feminist intellectual and moral milieu, recoils at the thought that her body might belong by right to anyone but herself. She accepts the claim that a woman's body is, objectively speaking, her very own property. In doing so,

modern woman undergoes an existential divorce. She splits herself asunder, dividing her “self” (or soul) from her body.

This instrumentalist attitude, which in fact reflects a much more masculine relationship to the body than a feminine one, is used to justify sexual license and the prevention or removal of its unwanted results through contraception and abortion. It follows that if my body belongs to me, my body is not, then, “really me” but something other than the self. Like any possession, it can be deployed or disposed of--by the real me. The body can enhance my life by bringing me pleasure, or it can ruin my life by bringing me pain; and ultimately, its fate is determined by its performance. With this mindset, procuring an abortion does not appear so very different from scheduling lipo-suction at the plastic surgeon’s office. The liberated woman is free to deliver herself from every physical encumbrance so that her own flesh and blood (which she owns) will conform to the high standard she sets for it.

An apparently more trivial but still very problematic consequence of the feminist divorce of self from body is the all-pervasive lack of modesty in speech and dress adopted by so many women, especially young women today. This discouraging phenomenon, which encourages women to believe that the type of clothing with which they adorn their bodies serves only to suit their own purposes and is of consequence only to themselves--scandal be damned!--is rooted in the very same interior split that permits the moral outrage of abortion. It’s hard to see straight when you have double vision; and what most women have failed to see is that immodesty and sexual activity outside of marriage is itself an ironic, premature and perverse form of feminine self-surrender. In an act of personal sabotage, the “liberated” woman sells cheaply or even gives away what she wants to claim belongs solely to the self.

It is certainly true that women, in a way that men do not, tend to identify themselves in a totalistic way with their bodies so that if the body is not all right, then neither is the woman herself acceptable. This natural tendency, however, is easily warped and twisted until it becomes an unhealthy obsession with physical appearance. For creatures subject to concupiscence, overidentification of the self with the body creates profound internal imbalance, the results of which are all too obvious. Those infamous eating disorders



that women seem so prone to have, we should recognize, their spiritual equivalents: there is a spiritual bingeing in which women sacrifice their families on the altar of their personal devotion and good works, seeking personal recognition and satisfaction from the institutional church as a substitute for what they are meant to receive from their families. Inevitably, these women fail to find what they are seeking and, in the end, they vomit out a bilious resentment.

There is also a form of spiritual starvation characteristic of women--the demon of perfectionism--which when applied to the person herself drives women to ever-new and more demanding ascetical heights because they cannot accept the healing, the body-soul reunion that comes with forgiveness and the rebirth of the whole person conferred by absolution. These are the women who, suffering from a contemporary but generally unrecognized form of scruples, whip themselves into a frenzy of activity in an attempt, usually unconscious, to pay for past sins, real and imagined. Both conditions, bingeing or starvation induce a state of spiritual barrenness. They produce within the feminine soul "antibodies" that thwart the work of grace. Such women are not yet sufficiently free to give themselves away, to offer themselves, soul and body, flesh and blood, to the Lord and Giver of Life.

Thus the typical modern woman lives in ignorance of the one reality on which her spiritual and psychic health truly depends: that the very essence of maternity, biological and spiritual, is sacrifice--self offering, soul offering, body offering. Openness to new life in the Spirit requires the entrustment of our bodies--and not just our souls-- as "living sacrifices" to God, to the Lord and Giver of Life. We must be willing to let our own flesh and blood be used--consumed even--for a purpose we will not yet fully understand. How can we possibly bring ourselves to do this?

There is really only one way, and that is to consume the living sacrifice offered daily on our behalf. In place of our bodies, we are given Christ's. The One who took flesh and blood from the Virgin "dwells among us" by returning his own flesh and blood to us. This, says Jesus, is "real food and real drink". This is food on which we cannot "binge"; this is food which satisfies every craving because it cannot be used to take the place of

anything else. It is precisely the “real thing” we have sought fruitlessly through substitute substances and relationships. And this is why Christ can claim that whoever

eats my flesh and drinks my blood lives in me and I in him. As I who am sent by the living Father myself draw life from the Father, so whoever eats me will draw life from me. (Jn 6:55-57 NAB? emphasis mine.)

Our Lord’s sacrifice left us a living body from which new life may be drawn. This is why when we eat this flesh and drink this blood our own flesh and blood are transformed. When we consume the bread of heaven, our bodies become bodies from which Life may be drawn.

**Pour forth, we beseech Thee, O Lord,  
Thy grace into our hearts,  
that we to whom the Incarnation of Christ, Thy Son,  
was made known by the message of an angel,  
may by his passion and Cross,  
be brought to the glory of his resurrection**

The Cross is a place where women gather. They gather if they are maidservants or mothers, if they are devoted friends and followers, even if they are merely curious, seeking they know not what. The Cross that is spiritual maternity is a place to which every woman, no matter what her state in life, is called, by an outpouring of grace, to be.

The Lord might well ask us, as he asked James and John, those “sons of thunder” and their ambitious mother (Mt. 20:22), whether we know what we ask when we pray that we will be brought to the glory of the resurrection by means of Christ’s passion and Cross. If we do know what we ask, then it may well be that we know because the Mother of Sorrows has taught us; for she, among all mothers, has paid the highest possible price for her maternity. She who said, “Be it done unto me according to thy word,” who said Yes, surrendered her future--and ours--in that one word: Yes.

Mary was indeed brought to glory by means of terrible suffering, the suffering that comes from the loss of a child--an only child, a beloved son in whom every hope is harbored. She who brought God’s Promise to birth in a stable and soon after fled into Egypt to protect that Promise, surrendered any hope for stability and security for herself and her

child. She who handed her infant son over to the waiting arms of ancient Simeon surrendered this child to his future --to rejection by his own people--and her own heart to the sword that would someday pierce it.

It was a moment of piercing revelation for me and of immense hope as well when it dawned on me that to be the Mother of the Messiah was in many respects an anguishing task, that Mary had a "difficult" son, that his behavior would not have merely delighted but would have often baffled and, yes, frustrated and wounded her. Indeed, what young mother is ever prepared for the constant struggle entailed in nurturing new life into maturity? The shock of labor pains no one, least of all your own imagination, can prepare you for and the lasting physical effects of childbearing on a once-young and beautiful body; the mental daze that comes from constantly interrupted sleep; the never entirely absent anxiety about the child's physical, mental and emotional welfare; the sudden arrival of round the clock and round the calendar responsibility for a life.

With the young one's growing pains come our own "growing away" pains: the first day of school, adolescence, college, marriage--all occasions in which there is a dying to our need for this child's dependence on us, our need to be the all-consoling or omni-competent mother. And that is if we are fortunate--if our child is not struck down by debilitating illness, by profound alienation from the Good, by death. Gradually, it dawns on us that the necessary but excruciatingly difficult goal of our maternity is, in fact, the loss of our child; for if the child is not "lost," the mature adult can never emerge.

Mercifully, these losses occur in stages, as they did for the blessed Mother: Luke is the chronicler of these tests to her faith: the disturbing dedication of her firstborn in the Temple; his traumatic emergence into the newfound independence of adolescence (three days of agony--What were you worried about, Mother? Don't you understand? ); the launching of his young adult crusade that brought him public adoration and public scorn and forced her to the margins of his life. All this before the final catastrophe from which her own heart had to be raised from the dead.

The Cross is a place of maternal self-emptying, and this is no less true for spiritual mothers. The joy of conceiving new life in the Spirit is tempered by what can seem an infinitely long gestation period--a burdensome pregnancy in which the real nature of what

we are carrying is hidden, not only to the world, but to us as well. If our labor pains--when they finally arrive--are intense and prolonged, we are given no narcotic to dull them. Our place of birthing may be as humble as a stable; but there will likely be no "kings" (or princes of the Church) to come and admire what has come forth from the womb of our soul--perhaps not even a humble shepherd in the form of a parish priest. In its infancy our offspring will require constant feeding and fondling, and as it grows it will alternately awe and disappoint us. We will not be spared moments of deep anxiety about the future of this new life; and despite its divine paternity, the thankless task of disciplining what is youthful in us will always remain. Finally, we will find that the more we succeed, the more we will lose: for as the new life must increase, so must we decrease. Just when things begin to really take off we will have to let go entirely and watch what we have nurtured to the point of spiritual maturity undergo crucifixion; for if we have succeeded in bringing forth Christ--which is what the Lord and Giver of Life perpetually begets in the soul of the baptized--then we can expect to find ourselves at the foot of the Cross. Often.

There, with our beloved child beyond our reach, we will watch what we have so carefully tended be despised and rejected by the very ones for whom this loving gift was intended. There, we will be asked to surrender all our maternal possessiveness, all our need to be needed, all our need to be appreciated. At the Cross, the child, the life, that has been entrusted to us in an outpouring of grace, our very own Isaac, must be given back to the Father.

Yet while the Cross is the place of maternal self-emptying, it is at the same time, the place of maternal fulfillment. It is the place where our maternity will be returned to us in a vastly purified and expanded form; and it is Mary who assures us that this will be so. The beloved only child--her ruined masterpiece--leaves a final, surprising legacy to his mother. He leaves in her keeping his youngest, his "beloved" disciple, the apple of his eye. And of her he makes a gift to this still very young man.

This exchange of love, of sons, marks the transformation of Mary's own maternity. At the very moment when her own personal maternal project is taken from her, it is replaced with her Son's project--a project which requires the "mothering" of all believers. With the loss of her only child Mary is free once again--for she is ever-Virgin--for a new

overshadowing by the Holy Spirit, so that when the Lord and Giver of Life comes to her again at Pentecost, she is filled to the bursting with new life--a life that is stamped with her nature, her character. The handmaiden of the Lord becomes Queen of Apostles, the heart and soul of "Mother Church."

All that she surrendered has been returned to the Mother of the Promise of God, the Mother of Yes. She has him and she has us. Heart and mind, body and soul, flesh and blood.

To conclude, let us return to the Ave, the refrain that anchors the Angelus to Mary's heart and to our own:

**Blessed art thou among women;  
and blessed is the fruit of thy womb, Jesus.**

If the analogy holds--if the Angelus is also about us and not only about Mary--then we can trust that we too will give birth to something "holy"--something conceived by the Spirit in our flesh that will, precisely because it is the work of the Spirit in us, contribute toward the final fulfillment of the Father's promise by bringing forth Christ in us, in our very own human nature.

That, of course, is the unmistakable stamp of the Spirit's paternity. Wherever the Spirit has been, there we find the Real Presence. We find it In Mary's womb, flesh and blood, bone and sinew, mind, heart, soul and divinity. We find it indwelling the baptized soul, itself a kind of "womb" for the priceless stamp of the Logos, imago dei. And we find it in the Eucharist, body and blood, soul and divinity, hidden under the appearance of bread and wine. We find it in the confessional, as healing pardon. We find it in the poor and in all whose suffering has been joined to that of the Crucified Christ. We find it in children, in those to whom the Kingdom of heaven already belongs.

She who was blessed above all women in her maternity is generous beyond measure in bestowing this blessing on the rest of us. In her glorious blessing lies the embryonic blessing given to all women, to all believers who are blessed because they consent to provide refuge for the Lord in their hearts.

As with all the great call stories in Scripture, the call that came through the message of an angel carries with it a "sign"--some concrete evidence that substantiates the alto-

gether extraordinary claim made by Gabriel: "And behold, your kinswoman Elizabeth in her old age has also conceived a son; and this is the sixth month with her who was called barren. For with God nothing will be impossible." (vv. 36-37)

When the Holy Spirit brings forth Christ in one instance, there is always an outpouring or overflowing of grace elsewhere. An abundance of interrelated blessings are bestowed for the sake of the miraculous birth, which is always meant to benefit the world, and not simply the individual. Neither age, nor barrenness nor virginity is an obstacle to spiritual maternity. The Lord and Giver of Life who is capable of raising the dead can engender new life wherever he finds fallow ground.

Elizabeth, kin to Mary and mother of John the Baptist, is herself sign of Yahweh's prevenient grace to Israel, of hope at last fulfilled. In particular, she is a sign for women who cannot conceive for medical reasons, who will not conceive because they are living the consecrated life or who have passed the age of childbearing.

She who was barren bursts forth with a life that will be spent entirely on the task of preparing the world for the coming of God in the flesh. Her pregnancy, too, is miraculous; and so she recognizes, by means of her own unborn child, the presence of the Messiah, God come to her. Elizabeth is the first to hear the Baptist's cry: Prepare! He's coming! Probably, she is the first to know Mary's secret and the first to share her joy. But it is only when Mary arrives that Elizabeth understands the full meaning what has happened to her: Who am I that the mother of my Lord should come to me? (Lk 1:43)

Elizabeth knows--who or what has told her? Between these two women a deep and lasting bond is instantly forged. It is the bond that comes from sharing in the mystery and miracle of maternity--a bond we see shared by women everywhere.

We must remember that the offer of assistance and companionship given by the newly pregnant Mary to the older woman, who might well have anticipated a difficult birth, is an offer that applies to every believer, and certainly to every woman, who is carrying within some embryonic life in the Spirit. The companionship Mary offers is both formative and feminine: By bringing her own child into our presence, she is teaching us how to be spiritual mothers, mothers in the order of grace; but she is also sharing her girlish pleasure and excitement that we are experiencing what she has experienced, that we

now know something she knows, that together we are learning the secret of what it means to be fully a woman, a Christ-bearer to the world.

The fruit of the Virgin Mother's womb hallows the ripening fruit of our soul, and she waits joyfully at our side as we prepare for the birth of our own apostolate. She is there encouraging us while we are in the throes of our labor; she is there when we present our infant first-fruits back to the Father; she is there when we search in vain for what we think we have lost; and she is there, embracing us when we are asked to surrender all that we have nurtured out of love back to the One whose love for us and for the world begot the child in us.

Let us stand and honor her by praying the Angelus:

#### THE ANGELUS

The angel of the Lord declared unto Mary,  
And she conceived by the Holy Spirit.

Hail Mary, . .

Behold the handmaid of the Lord.  
Be it done unto me according to Thy word.

Hail Mary, . .

AND THE WORD WAS MADE FLESH.  
And dwelt among us.

Hail Mary, , .

Pray for us, O holy Mother of God,  
That we may be made worthy of the promises of Christ.

Let us pray:

Pour forth, we beseech Thee, O Lord, Thy grace into our hearts; that we to whom the Incarnation of Christ, Thy Son, was made known by the message of an angel, may by His Passion and Cross, be brought to the glory of His Resurrection through the same Christ our Lord. Amen.

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