



MARY, A WOMAN OF PRAYER

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**'How much more will your heavenly Father
give the Holy Spirit to those who ask him!' (Lk 11:13)**



The mystical memory of Carmel

Right from the beginning, Mary is inseparably linked with prayer in the Carmelite tradition. The conflict with the false prophets of Baal ended, we find Elijah, the father of all Carmelites, at prayer: he climbed to the top of Carmel and bowed down to his hearth, putting his face between his knees. (1 Kgs 18:42). Then his servant called out: 'Behold, a little cloud like a man's hand is rising out of the sea' (1 Kgs 18:44), a harbinger of the rain about to fall in torrent. In the mystical memory of Carmel, this 'cloud' is seen as a symbol of the mother of Jesus. It is, of course, technically a legend. But it is not some kind of insubstantial myth. Titus Brandsma, a Carmelite priest who died at Dachau, draws attention to the symbolic import of this cloud for Carmelites. He refers to passages in the Old Testament, such as that of the cloud that overshadowed the Ark of the

Covenant in the wilderness, and shows that a cloud was often the symbol of God's presence among his people. So, to see the cloud rising from the sea as a symbol of Mary's place in the mystery of the incarnation is fully in harmony with the Old Testament as a foreshadowing of the New. In the words of Paul, 'the reality is Christ' (Col 2:17). From the outset, the mother of Jesus as a woman of silent prayer has always been a vital inspiration, essential and integral to the Carmelite charism.

Prayer is the key

The church has already come a long way in its understanding of Mary. In Mark, the natural family bond between Jesus and his mother stands out in striking contrast to the spiritual bond uniting the new family of believers. This deeper spiritual family bond between Mary and her Son gradually emerges in *Matthew*. In *Luke*, she is the first to follow her Son and is the model of every disciple 'who hears the word of God and does it'. In *John*, finally, she is the *mother* of every true disciple. Clearly, the mystery of the mother of Jesus forms part of Church's inner, secret treasure. It unfolds gradually through deepening prayer, as it did for early Church and as it did later in Carmel. In both traditions, Mary and her Son are inseparable: we cannot isolate the one from the other. Discovering the mystery of Mary is the fruit of ripening faith, and prayer is the key that unlocks that mystery.

'Let it be done to me'

It is true the gospels have little to tell us - explicitly - about Mary's prayer. But when we first met her, we already find her alone communing with God and open to receive the Spirit. The annunciation to Mary is a prayer scene. The Lord is with her, and the loving exchange between them reflects Teresa's description of prayer as 'an intimate sharing' (*Life* 8:5). God takes the initiative and comes in love to meet Mary, not because she first loved him but because he first loved her who is the 'most highly favoured one' (Lk 1:28) - the object of his special love. She is perplexed at the promise to give her a son, and responds in turn with a love that dares to question 'how'. She struggles for a deeper understanding. Light dawns gradually: 'The Holy Spirit will come upon you' (Lk 1:35). Elizabeth of the trinity invokes the Holy Spirit in words which clearly show imbued she was with the spirit of Mary's prayer: 'O consuming fire, Spirit of Love, "come upon me", and create in my soul a kind of incarnation of the Word: that I may be another humanity for Him in which he can renew his whole Mystery'.

A 'sign' brings further light to Mary: her cousin once 'sterile' is already fruitful by the power of God. For Mary, the mystery remains, but the impossible is possible: 'with God all things are possible' (Lk 1:37). And so in faith she accepts his word: 'Let it be done to me' (1:38). Here we find a basic pattern to her prayer. It is a questioning faith, with a challenge to surrender to God's word under the action of the Spirit.

For John of the Cross, this is why Mary is not just a woman of prayer but *the* woman of prayer: 'for she was always moved by the Holy Spirit' (3A 2:10) – like every true follower of her Son in Paul's understanding of discipleship: 'All whom are led by the Spirit of God are sons of God' (Rm 8:14)

A Spirit-filled woman

Mary is a perfect embodiment of that prayer which is intimately linked by Luke with the gift of the Spirit. We could almost call it his own original insight. It is true that we find the same prayer of Jesus in *Matthew* and *Luke*. 'I give you thanks, Father, Lord of heaven and earth...' (Mt 11:25; Lk 10:21). But Luke gives it his own slant. He, not Mathew, introduces the prayer by saying: 'He rejoiced *in the Holy Spirit* and said ...' So, Jesus himself prays under the powerful impulse of the Spirit. In the baptism scene, too, it is only Luke who tells us that Jesus was '*praying*' when the Holy Spirit descended upon him (Lk 3:21-22). He is launched on his public ministry by the Spirit received in deep communion with his Father. Even the words of the Our Father in *Luke*, 'Your kingdom come' (11:2), are given a curious but significant interpretation by some Fathers of the Church. They read it as: 'May your Holy Spirit come'. They caught the meaning. That is precisely what we pray for: the coming of God in his kingly power through the gift of the Spirit. Elsewhere, Luke repeats word for word the teaching of Matthew on prayer: 'ask...seek...knock' (Lk 11:9; cf. Mt 7:7). However, it is Luke, not Matthew, who says, 'How much more will your heavenly Father give the *Holy Spirit* to those who ask him!' (Lk 11:13; cf. Mt 7:11).

The gift of the Spirit is God's response to Mary's prayer – to every prayer. As the woman whose heart is filled with the Spirit, she is model for a distinguished line of Carmelite saints. When Teresa wanted to describe the effects of prayer, she borrowed a phrase from the psalms: '*Dilatasti cor meum*' (IC IV: 1:5; 2:5). It means literally: 'you have expanded my heart' (Ps 118:32). John of the Cross seems to be echoing this idea in the final line of perhaps his greatest poem, 'The Living Flame': 'how tenderly you swell my heart with love.' So, too, Therese of Lisieux is in line with the Mystical Doctor in her description of prayer as 'something... which expands my soul,' she says, 'and unites me to Jesus' (SS, p.242). More recently, Mother Teresa of Calcutta repeated the same lesson: 'Prayer enlarges the heart until it is capable containing God's gift of himself. Ask and seek, and your heart will grow big enough to receive him and keep him as your own.' Prayer is always answered: God gives the Spirit as he did to Mary, in response to her prayer. It is God's gift of himself – the infallible response to every prayer.

A woman who believes

Impelled by the Spirit, Mary sets out to share her new experience with her cousin Elizabeth. Their meeting is also a prayer, a giving-and-receiving in the Spirit. It is like a family liturgy. Together they celebrate the wonders of salvation; 'Elizabeth was filled with the Holy Spirit and she exclaimed with a loud cry, "Blessed are you among women, and blessed is the fruit of your womb!"' (Lk 1:41-42). Mary's *magnificat* of praise in response translates her experience of the Spirits action into a witness of hope for the hungry, the thirsty, the lowly and the poor who have nothing – the *anawim*, the 'little ones' like mighty from their thrones and raises the lowly; the fills the hungry with good things' (Lk 1:52-53). Her cousin Elizabeth also voices her praise of Mary's faith: 'Blessed is she who has believed...' (Lk 1:45). In this lies the key to Mary's prayer – a faith, like Abraham's, that believes the word of God in the face of the seemingly impossible. To quote John Paul II: 'In the expression "Blessed is the she who believed", we can therefore rightly find a *kind of "key"* which unlocks for us the innermost reality of Mary'. But belief is never static, and the faith of Mary leads her on a long journey of faith, seeking an ever deeper understanding of her Son.

Mary at the heart of the Church

Our final glimpse of Mary finds her in the midst of the disciples, 'constant in prayer' (Acts 1:14). The parallel with our first glimpse of her at prayer is striking. Then she opened to receive the Spirit, now she opens to receive him yet again. Then she listened faithfully to the word promising her a Son, now she listens faithfully to the word promising an extension of her Son, as it were, in a Spirit-filled Church. Then she was a witness in the Spirit to the 'mighty deeds' of God at work in her, now she is one with witnesses preparing to proclaim these 'mighty deeds' anew in the Spirit. A unique and silent witness at the heart of a praying Church, she is our mother and the first disciple of her Son; a sister, too, who stands beside us and who once walked, like us, in faith – on a pilgrim's journey of prayer.