

The Birthday of the Blessed Virgin Mary  
(Romans 8:28-30 / Matthew 1:1-16.18-23)  
08.09.2020

On this day we are invited to commemorate the birthday of the Blessed Virgin Mary. We contemplate the infant Mary before anything unfolded in her life that would lead her, or anyone else, to see the unique place she would hold in the story of salvation.

The call addressed to us this morning is to celebrate Mary just as her parents must have done on the day of her birth: simply for the gift of her life, before she did anything extraordinary with it.

Like every other human being, Mary was called and chosen by God before ever she saw the light of day.

Like her, all of us have a specific mission in life, even if it is yet unknown to us.

Today I find myself recalling a meditation by the saintly cardinal John Henry Newman in which he muses upon the fact that we all have a particular purpose in life... even if we have yet to fully realise just what it is that is awaited from us by God.

Before any of us ever began to do anything, or arrived to where we are at today on our life journey – no matter how much or how little we may esteem ourselves to have achieved and no matter how much or little others might esteem us to have accomplished – from all eternity the Lord held a dream for us in His heart. He still holds on to that dream for us. No doubt, there are elements to the divine dream for our lives which as yet remain unfulfilled.

Let me quote John Henry Newman: *God has created me to do Him some service. He has confided some work to me which He has confided to no other. I have my mission.*

When Newman prayed the prayer he was already advanced in his response to God's call upon his life. He had clearly begun to do what was asked of him, but he knew there was still more to come, even if he did not know exactly what this would entail.

I find it very significant that Newman should have gone on to say – even as he sought to know what God was asking of him – that he might never fully comprehend what his call was here below. He adds this line to that which I quoted above: *I might never know it (the particular work confided to me) in this life, but I shall be told it in the next.*

It is good for us to do as Newman did: to come back to the thought of God's purpose for our lives time and time again. How important it is for us to consider what that purpose might be at each step along life's way. Even in the unknown – indeed, especially in the unknown – it is vital that we engage ourselves, as Newman engaged himself, in the way indicated in the meditation to which I have been referring. Let me quote the saintly cardinal once again: [I am called] *To give myself to Thee, O Lord. To trust Thee wholly. Let me be Thy blind instrument. I ask not to see – I ask not to know – I ask simply to be used.*

I'm pretty sure those sentiments of John Henry Newman correspond to the sentiments Mary carried in her heart when she awoke to the Lord's very special calling upon her life.

The very least we could say is that the Lord asked something quite extraordinary of Mary. How could the teenage virgin girl of Nazareth, any better than the helpless infant in her parents' arms, have understood just what God was demanding of her when He sent the Angel Gabriel to convey the message that she was to be the Mother of a child conceived by the power of the Holy Spirit? She must have asked herself then just what it was that God awaited from her. She heard the Angel's words surely, but could she really be expected to have fully grasped their meaning?

It is to be asked if Mary understood any better what was asked of her when the Son she bore was reckoned by so many people (their own family circle included) to have *gone off His head* as He went about preaching and teaching in Galilee.

Do any of us think that Mary would have been able to make sense out of things as she stood by the foot of the cross on Calvary's Hill?

It is probably true to say that the further Mary advanced in her response to God's call the less she understood the Lord's ways. It is as if the older she got the more she was plunged into the unknowing of the infant child of Joachim and Anna whom we celebrate at Monte Oliveto Maggiore under the affectionate title: *The Maria Bambina*.

This morning I find myself recalling words from a reflection made by M. Marie Françoise – former abbess of our Olivetan Benedictine Monastery of nuns at l'Abbaye d'Eyres Moncube in France. I recall how she once declared in a meeting of our Congregation: *The patronage of the Blessed Virgin Mary and her maternal care are a great comfort. They are an invitation to remain as humble and as strong in hope as Mary was.* M. Marie-Françoise then added these words which I find particularly appropriate for this day: *In case of need, the Bambina of Monte Oliveto would recall this to us!*

The point the then abbess was making is that the image of the *Bambina* venerated at Monte Oliveto Maggiore is a reminder to us that Mary – *the greatest, the most blessed, of all women* – was once a simple infant. Like every other infant, Mary was totally dependent upon the care of others for her very life.

Such is the humility of our God that the same is true for the One whom Mary was chosen to bear and bring into this world: the Babe of Bethlehem, the Christ-Child whom we rightly hail as *King of Kings; the Ruler of Heaven and Earth. He became poor* – a helpless, needy, little baby – *for our sake*.

I find it consoling that wherever I am at in life – wherever any of us is at in our lives – the invitation addressed to us as we celebrate today's feast is to look to the Infant Mary, *Maria Bambina*. In our helplessness and our unknowing in regard to what God really wants for us; in our uncertainty around what He still awaits from us, it is important for us to be able to identify ourselves with her in a confident openness to God's dream for us – whatever that might be.

I think it is true to say that all of us can struggle to understand and make sense out of God's ways in our lives. And yet we can and should dare to believe that our lives have a purpose which is known to God, even if it is not entirely known to us. *God has a definite plan for us.* The prophet Jeremiah reminds us: *God's plan is for our good.*

The Lord wishes to use each and every one of us to accomplish His will in some unique way, with the particular gifting and also the peculiar poverty that is ours. I find it striking that Mary, expressing her own experience of God's unique use of her, sang of how God used her poverty: *He has looked upon the lowliness, the humility, the poverty of His servant.* So it is that the Lord looks upon us in what can feel at times to be (and really is!) nothing other than our *emptiness*.

At certain periods of our lives it is hard for us to know how to make our way forward, because we don't quite know what direction our lives are meant to take. Often we just don't know what way things are heading; towards what goals our lives should be aimed. When this is so, all we can do is remain as humble as Mary was and as trusting as she showed herself to be each step along the way. To quote M. Marie-Françoise: *In case of need remembering the Maria Bambina of Monte Oliveto...* daring to believe as St Bernard of Clairvaux declared in

his famous prayer, *The Memorare*, that the Most Gracious Virgin Mary remembers us and intercedes for us before the Throne of God's Love.

It is especially hard for us to have to struggle with pain and disappointments in our lives, and to have to deal with difficulties and deceptions. It might be asked: just how are we to react in what can appear to us to be nothing short of hopeless circumstances? There is only one way. It is the way that Mary followed. It is the way of confidence and trust! All we can do at certain moments is to adopt the disposition of the infant Mary in the arms of her parents – allowing ourselves to be held, carried, cared for by others – experiencing God's love close to us through the good people whom He sends our way.

To think of Mary as the Mother of Holy Hope at such times can also be of such great comfort to us. Our Lady of Holy Hope is also our Mother of Perpetual Help. The well-known icon which depicts Mary as our Mother of Perpetual Help shows how she held Jesus close to herself (near to her heart) even as His future cross loomed on the horizon. Just as Mary held her Son up in her arms – both close to her heart and presenting Him to the world – so too she presents Jesus to us as the Christ, our Saviour.

It can be consoling to think that just as Mary held the Christ-Child in her loving arms, so she holds us in her prayer,

Over and above all else, in and through everything we endure, we are called to believe that we are held in God's arms. This is all that really matters. Like the Infant Mary whom we look to today we are called to find our confidence in the simplicity and humility of the Spirit which the Blessed Virgin exemplified from the outset until the end of her earthly existence.

Fittingly, Newman's meditation on *Some Definite Service* leads into another meditation entitled: *On Hope in God*. Newman's hope expressed in this next meditation is founded upon his conviction that God has created all things for good – and us for our greatest good! Newman goes on to express his thoughts: *God knows what is my greatest happiness even as I do not. (...) God may lead us by strange ways indeed. If He does, it is for us to understand He wills our good – our happiness*. For this reason Newman exhorted his readers – and today that is us: *Let us put ourselves into His hands, and not be startled that He leads us by a strange way, a 'mirabilis via'. Let us be sure that He will lead us right, that He will bring us to that which is not indeed what we think best, but which is best for us*.

As we look to the Infant Mary today perhaps we feel all we can identify with in her is that helplessness she knew as a little baby. In our helplessness this morning we are called to believe that God created us intentionally and, in doing so, has given us a unique set of gifts, talents and abilities which He wants to see us use for some good service.

This must be properly understood.

It is not that everything has already been completely laid down for our lives. It is not that everything has already been decreed for our lives, down to the last detail and in all its minutiae. With the same unique set of gifts, talents and abilities we could do more than just one thing. What matters is for us to find out how to make some good use of our gifts; some godly use of them. As always, our free will must come into play if we are live our human lives as God intends.

Mary who was called and chosen from the beginning of time had, at a particular moment, to pronounce her *Fiat* to God, to say her *Yes* to the Lord's will for her, so that He could use her life as He intended. So too it is with us. Called, chosen, set apart by God for a definite reason,

we have to consent to do what God asks of us. We have to exercise our freedom and give our assent to His will for our lives.

Today I hear Mary encouragingly murmuring into the secret of our hearts those words she first spoke at Cana in Galilee to the servants: *Do whatever He tells you.* Those servants probably couldn't quite see the sense of filling with water once again the jars that had already been used for the ablutions that were customary among the Jews, but they did as they were bidden and, in so doing, were surprised by grace.

We are not told that Mary added anything to what she said to the disciples, but I cannot help but think of a little phrase that Jesus used when addressing Peter later on in the Gospel story – at point where the apostle just couldn't understand what the Master was asking of him. We are told that Jesus reassured him with these words: *You do not understand now, but later on you will.* I like to think that Mary may well have done said something similar to the baffled servants, adding that such had been her own experience in life at various points along the way. So often that is how it is for us in our lives. There are things that happen that we don't understand at the time, but later on we come to understand their meaning. We come to grasp that in and through them God was working out His purpose for our lives.

Amen!