

MARY, MOTHER OF MERCY

When Gabriel announces the joyful news – the *evangelion* – which from a humble village in Galilee is to change men’s lives forever,¹ “the Lady of the sweet name, Mary, is withdrawn in prayer.”² Before departing, the Angel tells Our Lady that God has also listened to Elizabeth. Mary ponders Gabriel’s words for a few moments, and her heart experiences an overpowering joy. She becomes absorbed in adoration of the hidden God, *latens Deitas*,³ now dwelling in her womb. Soon Mary is on her way to the hill country; her cousin may need her help, and she herself needs to see Elizabeth. She has to share her joy, and Elizabeth is the only one, apart from Joseph, to whom she can tell this happy secret. During this time Mary is an “image of the Church to come, which carries the hope of the world in her womb across the mountains of history.”⁴

Greater even than the joy of life that a mother senses in her newborn baby, Mary’s and Elizabeth’s happiness is evident to everyone in Ain Karim. God has taken the initiative; he has chosen the fertile soil of their generosity and self-abandonment and has begun in them the true springtime of history. While the world at large tries to live on its uncertain joys, in this corner of Judaea God’s joy silently breaks forth. Saint Luke tells us that when Mary greets Elizabeth, John the Baptist jumps for joy in his mother’s womb. The prophet David danced and leapt before the Ark of the Covenant, and now the *greatest of those born of women*, he who is *more than a prophet*,⁵ jumps for joy at the arrival of Mary, the new Ark of the Covenant. In this way too, John the Baptist is the forerunner of the Son of David; as he himself will say years later, he is the *friend of the bridegroom, who . . . rejoices greatly at the Bridegroom’s voice*.⁶ Even now, on hearing the Bridegroom’s Mother, he is moved by the Holy Spirit and, though not yet able to speak, becomes the prophet of the joy of the Gospel.

My spirit rejoices in God

*The Lord your God is in your midst, a warrior who gives victory; he will rejoice over you with gladness, he will renew you in his love; he will exult over you with loud singing as on a day of festival.*⁷ Saint Luke had the prophet Zephaniah very much in mind when he recounted these moments in Our Lady’s life. The heartfelt, exultant joy that she had contained within herself during the journey from Nazareth now spread to Elizabeth and Saint John and overflowed in the *Magnificat* – that great song of joy and mercy.⁸ “Our Mother had meditated deep and long on the words of the holy men and women of the Old Testament who awaited the Saviour, and on the events they had taken part in. She must have marveled at all the great things that God, in his boundless mercy, had done for his people, who were so often ungrateful. As she considers the

¹ Cf. *Lk* 1:26-38

² Saint Josemaria, *Holy Rosary*, 1st Joyful Mystery

³ Cf. hymn *Adoro Te devote*

⁴ Benedict XVI, Enc. *Spe Salvi*, 30 September 2007, no. 50

⁵ *Mt* 11:9, 11

⁶ *Jn* 3:29

⁷ *Zeph* 3:17-18

⁸ Cf. *Lk* 1:46-55

tenderness shown time after time by God towards his people, Mary's immaculate heart breaks out into loving words: *my soul magnifies the Lord.*"⁹

My spirit rejoices in God my Saviour. Our Lady is a daughter of the Mediterranean world, of lands where people dance and sing, and emotions felt in the depths of the soul are expressed in gestures and exclamations. "Sometimes you'll find that words are not enough, and you'll need to sing for love . . . You'll walk through the world giving light like burning torches streaming with sparks of fire."¹⁰ Mary's joy is not just because God has come into her life, but because, through her, the Son of God has become one of us. *His mercy . . . is from generation to generation.*

The Church recognizes herself in the *Magnificat*, "the song of the People of God walking through history,"¹¹ and so she proclaims it every day in the office for Vespers. Like Our Lady, the Church does not sing of a small private joy; she sings of the joy of all mankind, a joy that comes from hope in *God my Saviour*. The Church knows that God is stronger than evil. *The weakness of God is stronger than men.*¹² The strength of the *powerful* and the *proud of heart*, who *make war on . . . those who keep the commandments of God and bear testimony to Jesus*,¹³ and threaten to crush the Love of God, is no more than outward force, noise, vanity: *like chaff which the wind drives away.*¹⁴

"Our infinite sadness can only be cured by an infinite love."¹⁵ Mercy is God's joyful love that comes to meet a saddened world, a "vale of tears."¹⁶ *God comes forth like a bridegroom leaving his chamber, and like a strong man runs his course with joy.*¹⁷ He comes with his affectionate love, his forgiveness, his understanding. He comes above all with the joy of the Holy Spirit, uncreated Charity, a joy that is the continual source of his mercy, because only from joy can come the strength to forgive unreservedly and limitlessly. God's joy is closely tied to his mercy. He has created us for himself, and wants to save us from the sadness of sin so as to give us a happiness that no one can take from us.¹⁸

God has entrusted this joy to his Church, and no one can take it from her "in spite of everything."¹⁹ That is why she sings with Mary, *all generations will call me blessed*. Every generation eventually finds in the Church a Mother who, through the crises and tragedies of history, and even in her suffering because of the children or strangers who ill-treat or despise her, overflows with the joy of God's salvation, and tirelessly offers his mercy to all. Together with Mary in her *Magnificat*, the Church in a way stands above history.²⁰ She holds firmly to the joy

⁹ Saint Josemaria, *Friends of God*, no. 241

¹⁰ Saint Josemaria, *Letter*, 11 March 1940, no. 30

¹¹ Pope Francis, Homily 15 August 2013

¹² *1 Cor* 1:25

¹³ *Rev* 12:17

¹⁴ *Ps* 1:4

¹⁵ Pope Francis, Apostolic Exhortation *Evangelii Gaudium*, 24 November 2013, no. 265

¹⁶ Antiphon *Salve Regina*

¹⁷ *Ps* 19:7

¹⁸ Cf. *Jn* 16:22

¹⁹ *Christ is Passing By*, no. 131

²⁰ Saint Josemaria, "In the original Greek of Luke's Gospel, we have seven aorist verbs that indicate the same number of actions which the Lord carries out repeatedly in history: 'He has shown strength... he has scattered the proud... he has put down the mighty... he has exalted those of low degree... he has filled the hungry with good things... the rich he has sent empty away... he has helped... Israel.'" Benedict XVI, Audience, 15 February 2006.

of the Resurrection and glimpses, amid all the sorrow and wretchedness, so much hidden and fruitful sanctity. She sees the mercy of God that *is on those who fear him from generation to generation*.

God's poor

The *Magnificat* is infused with the “the spirituality of the biblical *anawim*, that is, of those faithful who not only recognize themselves as ‘poor’ in the detachment from all idolatry of riches and power, but also in the profound humility of a heart . . . open to the bursting in of the divine saving grace.”²¹

Our Lady (and we with her) does not sing of her own greatness, but of her smallness – *the lowliness of his handmaid* – and the *great things* that God had done for her. *Magnificat anima mea Dominum*, “my soul magnifies the Lord”: every generation and culture has set these words to music and will continue doing so. They could be rendered as, “How great God is! How well he does things!” Mary’s enthusiasm at Ain Karim will resound on her Son’s lips three decades later, at the point in the Gospels when Jesus’ joy was specifically remarked upon. It is beautiful to observe that his joy has the same notes as the *Magnificat*. *In that same hour he rejoiced in the Holy Spirit and said, “I thank Thee, Father, Lord of heaven and earth, that thou hast hidden these things from the wise and understanding and revealed them to little children.”*²² God’s special love for humble people contains a deep mystery. God is “disarmed” by simple people; their language, seemingly so naive and inoffensive, *put(s) down the mighty from their throne*. Mercy shows us the true face of God and *the power of his arm*, which always conquers in the end. *By the mouths of babes and infants, thou hast founded a bulwark . . . to still the enemy and the avenger.*²³

When John sends his disciples to ask Jesus whether he is *he who is to come*,²⁴ our Lord spells out the signs of God’s presence in the words of the prophet Isaiah,²⁵ among which one stands out: *the poor have the good news preached to them.*²⁶ The poor in the Bible are those who wait for the coming of God. Zachary is poor, and therefore he recognises *that through the tender mercy of our God the day shall dawn on us from on high.*²⁷ Simeon is poor, and therefore his *eyes have seen thy salvation.*²⁸

This poverty is not an impoverished soul or a narrow outlook, nor does it mean an absence of learning. The wise men who went to Bethlehem, and who surely belonged to the cultural elite of their country, were *poor in spirit.*²⁹ Their attitude contrasted with the self-sufficiency of the scribes, the anxiety of Herod and the superficial curiosity of the people in Jerusalem who, once they had got over the trepidation caused by the arrival of the Magi and their question about the King who had been born, thought no more of it. The wise men had the

²¹ Benedict XVI, Audience, 15 February 2006

²² *Lk* 10:21. Cf. *Mt* 11:25-27

²³ *Ps* 8:2

²⁴ *Mt* 11:3

²⁵ Cf. *Is* 42:7, 18; 61:1; *Lk* 7:19-20; *Mt* 11:2-3

²⁶ *Lk* 7:22; cf. *Mt* 11:5

²⁷ *Lk* 1:78

²⁸ Cf. *Lk* 2:30

²⁹ *Mt* 5:3

simplicity of the Bethlehem shepherds; they had a heart to understand, eyes to see, ears to listen,³⁰ and so they were among the first to adore him.

He has regarded the low estate of his handmaiden . . . and his mercy is on those who fear him from generation to generation. The merciful gaze of God rests on those who can receive him, for they recognize with the psalmist: *I am poor and needy; but the Lord takes thought for me.*³¹ God “needs” us to be poor if he is to enter into our soul. “Jesus has no time for calculations, for astuteness, for the cruelty of cold hearts, for attractive but empty beauty. What he likes is the cheerfulness of a young heart, a simple step, a natural voice, clean eyes, attention to his affectionate word of advice. That is how he reigns in the soul.”³²

Daughter and Mother of Mercy

Our Lady is Daughter of God and Mother of God: *genuisti qui te fecit*,³³ you became the Mother of your Maker. Mary was the Mother of the God who created her, and who redeemed her in a special way that distinguishes her from the rest of mankind. “At her conception Mary received a blessing from the Lord and loving kindness from God her saviour.”³⁴ Therefore she is the first Daughter of God’s mercy. And while being Daughter, Mary is also Mother of the God of mercy. This is why we call her *Mater misericordiae*, Mother of mercy. “Let us address her in the words of the *Salve Regina*, a prayer ever ancient and ever new, so that she may never tire of turning her merciful eyes upon us, and make us worthy to contemplate the face of mercy, her Son Jesus.”³⁵ Saint Josemaria taught us that “we always go to Jesus, and always ‘return’ to him, through Mary.”³⁶ Our Mother dissolves the pride in our hearts and helps us to become little, so that God may see our humility and Jesus may be born in us. Let us turn to her with the confidence of children, in so many small details of affection; one that Saint Josemaria recommended to the faithful of Opus Dei is to kiss the rosary before praying Psalm Two every Tuesday.

All generations have called her and *will call her blessed*, because “love brings joy, but a joy that has its roots in the shape of the Cross.”³⁷ With her Son, Our Lady suffered on Calvary “the dramatic encounter of the sin of the world and God’s mercy.”³⁸ The Pietà, as representations of Our Lady holding her dead Son have come to be called, powerfully depicts our Mother’s intimate sharing in God’s mercy. “Piety” is a direct translation of the Hebrew word *hesed*, one of the terms by which the Hebrew Bible expresses God’s mercy. On the Cross, despised by men, God more than ever helps his servant Israel to remember his mercy.

When men forget God’s mercy, God takes it to the extreme: *Woman, behold your son . . . behold your mother.*³⁹ These words of Our Lord from the Cross to his Mother and to each of us,⁴⁰

³⁰ Cf. *Deut* 29:3

³¹ *Ps* 40 (39):17

³² Saint Josemaria, *Christ is Passing By*, no. 181

³³ Roman Missal, Common of the Blessed Virgin, Introit

³⁴ Divine Office for 8 December, Office of Readings, Antiphon

³⁵ Pope Francis, Bull *Misericordiae Vultus*, 11 April 2015, no. 24

³⁶ Saint Josemaria, *The Way*, no. 495

³⁷ *Christ is Passing By*, no. 43

³⁸ Pope Francis, Apost. Exhort. *Evangelii Gaudium*, no. 285

³⁹ *Jn* 19: 26-27

⁴⁰ Cf. Saint John Paul II, Enc. *Ecclesia de Eucharistia*, 17 April 2003, no. 57

show “the mystery of a special saving mission. Jesus left us his mother to be our mother. Only after doing so did Jesus know that ‘all was now finished’ (*Jn 19:28*).”⁴¹ We have recourse to her protection, beseeching Mary to make us merciful as the Father is merciful. “She will enlarge our heart and fill it with mercy.”⁴²

⁴¹ Pope Francis, Apost. Exhort. *Evangelii Gaudium*, no. 285

⁴² St Josemaria, “El compromiso de la verdad”, 9 May 1974, published in *Josemaria Escriva y la Universidad*, Pamplona: Eunsa 1993, p. 109