**MARY, THE PREGNANT VIRGIN** Part Two

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In one of the greatest works of world literature, Dante’s *Commedia* or *The Divine Comedy*, in Section 2, *Purgatorio,* the purgatorial routine for those who walk the terraces of the mountain towards paradise includes meditating on examples of the virtue opposed to the sin they are purging. Examples of virtue always begin with an episode from the life of the Virgin Mary. For example, Canto X treats with those walking on the terrace of pride – pride is the sin that needs to be purged. On this terrace, it is the virtue of humility that is the subject for meditation, and humility is illustrated by three rock carvings. The first is of the Annunciation, and Mary is spoken of as humble and exalted more than any other creature – she is the supreme example of the virtue of humility.

This provides the inspirational value of Part 2 of Chapter 5 of *Evangelii Gaudium*. Pope Francis, in this final section of his Exhortation, provides a beautiful reflection on Mary and speaks of the qualities of her life that can inspire us in our own lives. Jesus is born into the midst of material deprivation, born in a stable with poor swaddling clothes, yet Mary turns this into a home through the power of her maternal love and tenderness.

Pope Francis, in a reference to Cana, speaks of Mary as a friend who is ever concerned that wine not be lacking in our lives. Wine is the scriptural symbol of true joy and vitality.

Whatever the material conditions we may live in, do we seek to create our friaries not as houses but as welcoming homes through the way we express love? Do we recognize the power that tenderness has to transform human hearts, a tenderness that refuses to treat others badly in order for ourselves to feel important?

Perhaps, we could reflect here on the words of Pope Benedict XVI on the “mission to love”:

It is not science that redeems human beings: men and women are redeemed by love. This applies even in terms of this present world. When someone has the experience of a great love in his or her life, this is a moment of redemption, which gives a new meaning to their life.

In her *Magnificat*, Mary praises God for bringing down the mighty from their thrones and sending the rich away empty. Throughout our world, many are denied justice and suffer oppression under the mighty and the rich. Do we express practical concern in whatever way we can for those who suffer injustice, for those innocent ones who are experiencing the ravages of war, famine, expulsion from their homes and homeland, slavery, violence? In England, Cardinal Vincent Nichols spoke out strongly on that most odious of modern evils, people trafficking, in which human beings are reduced to mere commodities to be used, soiled, exploited and discarded merely for profit. There are so many issues in our society in which our Franciscan groupings, whatever form they may take, can work for justice.

We are told in the gospel that Mary carefully kept all these things, pondering over them in her heart. Do we take time to move aside from the business of the world to pay attention to the events of our life, great and small, seeking to recognize there the traces of God’s presence? So often we could utter the words of Jacob, “Truly God is in this place and I never knew it”. God is present not just at some future time but in the everyday now of life. It is by keeping all those events of my experience in my heart and prayerfully pondering over them in the quiet of my heart that, like Mary, who is called Seat of Wisdom, I too shall grow in wisdom, grow in knowing what is truly important and right for my life. Prayer and contemplation, paying attention, are so important in a life of effective ministry, a recognition of the importance of the spiritual. Again, we might reflect on the words of Pope Saint John Paul II,

Is it not one of the signs of the times that in today’s world, despite widespread secularization, there is a widespread demand for spirituality, a demand which expresses itself in large part as a renewed need for prayer?

Mary is no stranger to suffering and pain. When Jesus was but an infant, she had heard the words of Simeon, “A sword of suffering will pierce though your own soul.” She knew the pain that only a mother feels when her son faced opposition, hostility, rejection. She must constantly have recalled and continued to take to heart the words that the angel spoke to her at the Annunciation, “Do not be afraid Mary”. She must have continually renewed in her heart the pledge she made to God through the angel, even though she had not understood how or why, “Let what you have said be done to me”. And when she stood with all a mother’s suffering at the foot of the cross on which her only son was dying, she continued to believe, to trust. The disciples fled, yet she did not flee. She stayed there with a mother’s courage, a mother’s fidelity, a mother’s goodness, and a faith that did not waiver in the hour of darkness. May we learn from Mary our mother to be signs of love ever ready to share suffering and to offer assistance. And may we learn to have the strength to continue to believe, to trust even in those times when we ourselves will suffer.

So let us pray with Pope Francis:

Mary, Virgin and Mother, you who, moved by the Holy Spirit, welcomed the word of life in the depths of your humble faith: As you gave yourself completely to the Eternal One, help us to say our own “yes” to the urgent call, as pressing as ever, to proclaim the good news of Jesus.

Mary, our Mother, help us to bear radiant witness to communion, service, ardent and generous faith, justice and love of the poor, that the joy of the Gospel may reach the ends of the earth, illuminating even the fringes of our world. Mother of the living Gospel, wellspring of happiness for God’s little ones, pray for us. Amen.