

## Why We Honour Mary

The celebration of the 50<sup>th</sup> Anniversary of the Winnipeg Metropolia of the Ukrainian Catholic Church in Canada is a time of grace, a very special time to reflect seriously – as Church and as individual faithful – on our Christian vocation, and to make a serious effort to respond to Jesus' invitation to draw closer to him.

We now continue our series of spiritual reflections, which are an important part of our Jubilee celebrations aimed at our spiritual renewal.

Today, every Ukrainian Catholic parish throughout Canada joins together to reflect upon the theme of “Why We Honour Mary.”

*Themes: Why We Honour Mary; Spiritual Childhood; Mary, Jesus and the Paschal Mystery; Mary, the Perfect Disciple.*

### Why We Honor Mary

At the Annunciation, when the angel announced to Mary that she was to be the mother of the Messiah, she was confused and afraid until the angel said: “Mary, don't be afraid!” and assured her that what was about to happen would happen through the power of the Holy Spirit. When Mary heard this the fear left her. She stopped asking questions and bowed her head in humble surrender.

When she went to visit her cousin Elizabeth to tell her what happened, Mary was able to sing with joy: “My soul proclaims the greatness of the Lord, and my spirit exults in God my Saviour. Because he has looked upon his handmaid. Yes, from this day forward all generations shall call me blessed, for the Almighty has done great things for me. Holy is his name.”

We honor Mary first and foremost, not because of what she herself has done, but for what God has done for her. We honor Mary because she teaches us humility, trust, and obedience to God's word. She teaches us to recognize and praise God for the great things that he has done for us.

When Joseph learned of Mary's pregnancy, he was confused. He didn't want to hurt her. He thought of breaking the engagement secretly. But when an angel appeared to him in a dream and said: “Don't be afraid to take Mary. This is all a part of God's plan.” Joseph trusted and obeyed, even though he had the legal right to divorce Mary.

Why do we honor Mary? Because Jesus honored her first. First of all he chose to come to us through Mary. That is the way he wanted to do it. He could have chosen another way. But he didn't. Jesus comes to us through Mary and wants us to go to him through Mary, as happened at the wedding in Cana. Mary always points to Jesus.

In the icons of the Mother of God, in the Eastern tradition, Mary is never depicted alone. She is always with Jesus, bringing our attention to him; always reminding us to do whatever he tells us to do, to obey him; always giving us the perfect example of

obedience to God's word; always bringing Jesus to us, as she first brought him into the world; as she brought him to her cousin Elizabeth, and to Simeon and Anna in the temple; as she brought him to the wedding feast in Cana.

We honor Mary because she brings Jesus to us, and us to Jesus, and because she teaches us to bring Jesus to others. Mary is everything we are called to be. That is why we honor her.

## **Spiritual Childhood**

One day Jesus took a child and placing it before his disciples said: "Unless you become like this little child you cannot enter the Kingdom of Heaven."

In other words, to enter the Kingdom of Heaven, to experience the new life that Jesus is offering us, we need the heart of a child. Unless we open our hearts with the simple trust of a child, we will not be capable of receiving the gifts that God has prepared to give us. Without the simplicity and transparency of a little child we cannot share in God's love, peace and joy of a child.

At times we seem to worry so much about what the future holds for us, for the world, for our church, our communities. There seems to be so much tension in our efforts to solve the multitude of problems with which we are faced. We are so weighed down with our feelings of loneliness. Our hearts are so sad and heavy, that it is difficult for anyone to see that we are free, joyful children of God, who trust in his goodness.

Jesus wants us to become like little children, but not like children without a father and mother. Jesus said: "I will not leave you orphans." This is why he told us to address God as Father, Abba – daddy.

He also gave us a mother. On Calvary, turning to John, Jesus said: "Behold your mother!" Then to Mary he said: "Behold your son!" Jesus wanted us to have a mother to guide us along the path of spiritual childhood, and help us to know that we are loved and cared for by God and by his and our mother. We honor Mary because she is our mother. Our natural mother gave us life, and was the main instrument in our natural growth and development. She is the one who makes great sacrifices on our behalf. She never stops loving, caring, and praying for us. Mary is our spiritual mother. Her consent at the annunciation, her suffering with Jesus at the foot of the cross, her quiet prayers, her cooperation and openness to the Holy Spirit, resulted in the birth of the physical body of Jesus and in the birth of the Church, the mystical body of Jesus.

One of the important roles of a mother is to protect her children. Mary does that. She protects us from the evil one. This seems to be especially evident in today's world of wars and rumors of wars; in a world that is obsessed with sex and violence.

Perhaps that is why, with her maternal vigilance and caring she has been appearing so frequently around the world: in Lourdes, Fatima, Medjugorje, Ukraine, calling her children to change their sinful ways, to stop hurting themselves, and to return to her Son Jesus.

## **Mary, Jesus, and the Paschal Mystery**

In Jesus' life the Paschal Mystery didn't begin when he was arrested in the garden; and it didn't last just a week, that we today refer to as Holy Week. His whole life, from the moment John the Baptist greeted him as the Lamb of God, was Jesus' way of the cross. According to St. Luke's Gospel Jesus, life was a slow and steady journey toward Jerusalem, where he would be crucified. (Lk 9:31)

The Paschal Mystery began early for Mary also; perhaps with the flight into Egypt, followed by Simeon's word about the sword that would pierce her heart, and that Jesus would be rejected by men, and that many in Israel would stand and fall because of him. So let's follow Mary during Jesus' public ministry and try to see her as our model during this period.

Jesus said: "If anyone would come after me, let him deny himself and take up his cross and follow me. For whoever would save his life will lose it, and whoever loses his life for my sake and the Gospel will save it." (Mk 8:34)

This is the very core of the Gospel. This is the secret, the key to all we are called to be; leaving self behind, being other-centered, neighbor-centered, Jesus-centered, God-centered. When we take Jesus seriously, and want to truly follow him, we quickly learn that the way to true happiness is the way of self-forgetfulness and sacrificial love. When we remain with Jesus and trust him enough to follow him all the way to Calvary, then, and only then will we really get to know him.

Only then do we begin to realize how much he really does love us, and that we too must suffer and die for each other, as Jesus suffered and died for all of us. We begin to realize that we must suffer and die with Jesus in order to rise with him to new life.

The way of the cross is the way of sacrificial love, the way to eternal salvation. There is no other way. We are all called to be with Jesus, not only in his glory, but also in his suffering. No one was closer to Jesus in his suffering than Mary, his mother. That is why she is our guide and model.

In his Marian Year encyclical, the Holy Father, Pope John Paul II applied to Mary St. Paul's explanation of the earthly life of Jesus: "Christ Jesus, though he was in the form of God, did not count equality with God a thing to be grasped, but he emptied himself." (Phil 2:6-7) "Through faith," the Pope wrote, "Mary was fully united to Christ in his deprivation. Beneath the cross she partakes, in faith (in her heart), in everything Jesus suffered on the cross."

Although she was without sin, she suffered even as her Son Jesus suffered, who also was without sin. She is our sorrowful mother. This means that since Mary is our mother too, we have a mother who is able to sympathize with our weaknesses, our fatigue, and our temptations; because she was tempted as we are, yet without sinning.

Let us look at some moments of testing for Mary, for example, when Jesus was lost in the temple. When after three days of searching, Mary and Joseph finally found Jesus, his mother said to him: "My Son why have you treated us like this?" What does Jesus say to them? "How is it you sought me? Did you not know that I must be in my Father's house?"

What mother wouldn't be able to understand what Mary felt in her heart at these words? "How is it that you sought me?" Almost like, "Shouldn't you have known better?" These words seem to place a certain distance between Jesus and his Mother. Jesus seems to disregard his mother's feelings. Without explicitly saying so, Jesus was pointing to the fact that his relationship with his Father and doing his will, was far more important; that all other relationships were secondary. Mary, in turn, remains silent, keeping these things in her heart. (Lk 2:46)

Through repeated tests of faith Mary becomes more and more like Jesus, "who though he was in the form of God, did not count equality with God a thing to be grasped, but emptied himself." And so too Mary, though she was the Mother God, silently accepted humiliations, courageously endured hardships, let herself be deprived, and appeared as a mother just like any other mother. That is why, now that she is glorified in heaven with her Son. Mary can reach out to us and lead us to follow her, and say with the apostle Paul, but with much more authority: "Be imitators of me, as I am of Christ." (1 Cor 11:1)

Mary, in fact, was not only an imitator of her Son Jesus; she was his first and perfect disciple. Hers was a unique holiness, as the Mother of God. Not once was she unfaithful to her "Amen" at the Annunciation, even if she didn't understand. Hers was a total and complete surrender to the will of God.

To understand this all we have to do is compare her with St. Peter. When Jesus told Peter that in Jerusalem rejection, suffering, and death waited him, Peter rebukes Jesus and said: "God forbid, Lord! This shall never happen to you." (Mt 16:22) Peter was worried about Jesus. But he was also worried about himself. Mary wasn't worried about herself. As always she remained silent. Her answer to everything was a silent acceptance that was based on an unshakable faith. At the wedding in Cana, instead of being offended at the apparently harsh words of Jesus, all Mary said was: "Do whatever he tells you!" (Jn 2:5) She understood through faith, and maybe by the way Jesus looked at her, that she could say that.

All of this does not mean that Mary's life was one of constant affliction. On the contrary, she discovered a new kind of joy – the joy of not doing her own will, the joy of believing, the joy of giving to God what for him is the most precious thing; the greater joy in giving than in receiving.

### **Mary, the Perfect Disciple**

Jesus' invitation to take up one's cross and follow him goes to the very heart of the Gospel. It's a question of deciding what we want to build our life on; whether it's on self or on Christ. It's a question of deciding for whom we want to live, for ourselves or for Christ. This is the choice we are faced with every day; each person in a different way.

Each 'no' we say to our self for the sake of love, is a 'yes to Christ'. This is the way to a fuller and happier life. It is the way to eternal life.

Jesus said: "I have come that they might have life and have it in abundance." Jesus also said: "A grain of wheat remains a solitary grain unless it falls into the ground and dies. But if it dies, it bears a rich harvest." (Jn 12:24)

Jesus is that solitary grain that died on Calvary and brought forth a rich harvest. If we want to share in the life of Christ, which is the life of love, we must die with Jesus.

St. Paul put it this way: “Are you not aware that we who were baptized into Christ Jesus were baptized into his death? Through baptism into his death we were buried with him, so that as Christ was raised from the dead by the glory of the Father, we too might have new life.” (Rom 6:3-5)

We see this principle of life through death working all around us:

- a seed has to die before it can become a flower or a tree.
- A caterpillar has to die to become a butterfly.
- Each one of us had to die to the warmth and security of our mother’s womb, and endure the pain and cold outside the womb in order to experience the richness of life outside the womb.
- Then we had to die to crawling, and suffer the pain of stumbling and falling in order to appreciate the advantages of walking and running.
- later on we had to die to the security of home and the attention we got there in order to start growing socially. No pain, no gain!

In order to experience the joy and peace of the Resurrection, of new life in Christ, we must gradually die to our self-centeredness.

- This means dying to our resentments, jealousies, hatred and unforgiveness, in order to experience the healing power of forgiveness.
- It means dying to our pride, in order to know the inner freedom of a humble heart.
- It means dying to greed, in order to know the joy and freedom of giving and letting go.
- It means dying to our insensitivity and callousness, to know the rightness and peace of a compassionate heart.

First the cross, then the resurrection. First the suffering and pain of Good Friday, then the joy of Easter Sunday. First the fast, then the feast. This is the core of Christian discipline. It is the way to a fuller and happier life, eternal life.

With his Passion and Resurrection Jesus reveals to us the mystery of new life through death, and invites us to enter that holy mystery with him, and with Mary, his and our Mother, who at the foot of the cross suffered in her heart what Jesus suffered in his body.

Mary saw the flesh of her own flesh, being scourged, bleeding, being crowned with thorns. She saw her Jesus, almost completely naked before the crowds, trembling, his body turning and twisting on the cross. She heard the banging of the hammers and the insults; “If you are the Son of God come down from the cross!” She saw the soldiers divide his garments and the tunic she herself had probably woven.

If Mary was tempted, even as Jesus was in the desert, this took place beneath the cross; and the temptation was very deep and painful, because the reason for it was Jesus

himself. She believed in the promises of Jesus, she believed he was the Messiah, the Son God.

She knew that if he had asked the Father, he would have sent him “more than twelve legions of angels” to save him. (Mt 26:53) But she saw that Jesus didn’t do this. If he freed himself from the cross, he would also free her from this horrible sorrow.

But he didn’t do it; and Mary didn’t cry out: “Come down from the cross; save yourself and me!” Nor did she cry: “My Son, you have saved others, why don’t you now save yourself?” Mary remained silent. She remained faithful to her original ‘yes’ right to the end.

Today Mary sees us and speaks to us. She speaks to us the words of everlasting life. Mary says to us, as once she said to the waiter at the wedding in Cana: “Do whatever my Son tells you to do!” Mary calls us to live a life worthy of Christ and worthy of the love he has shown us.

Mary’s words are a call to faith. She calls us to open our hearts fully to God’s Word. She calls us to listen to the Word, to receive it with joy, and to live it with perseverance. She calls us to deepen and purify our faith so as to unite ourselves to her Son, who laid down his life for us.

Mary encourages us to remain close to the cross, which reveals the terrible tragedy of sin and God’s tremendous love for sinners. Through Mary we learn to obey God’s word and how obedience leads us to genuine freedom.

Mary’s words, “Do whatever he tells you” remind us to lead lives of loving service, lives that clearly reflect the love of her Son who came “not to be served, but to serve.”

### **Jubilee Prayer**

Lord, Jesus Christ, as we celebrate the fiftieth anniversary of the establishment of the Ukrainian Catholic Metropolia, we give thanks for your loving kindness and the abundant graces received during the span of fifty years.

We also humbly ask for the grace of an ever deeper realization of your loving presence; that we are all children of one Heavenly Father.

Again and again, we pray for the grace of perseverance in faith; that we may all be united in your loving and compassionate heart, and that with renewed enthusiasm, love and compassion, we might continue the work of salvation for the glory of our Heavenly Father.

May your holy will be done on earth, as it is in Heaven! Amen.