

The Blessed Virgin Mary, Model of Faith

given in Lourdes by Father Joseph Johnson, Ch. M. (May 2013)

Our pilgrimage to Lourdes this year takes place within the context of the “Year of Faith” declared by Pope Benedict XVI and the 900th anniversary of papal approval for the Order of Malta. Authentic faith always bears fruit in action. It was the faith of Blessed Gerard which gave rise to this great Order and all its good works over these past nine centuries.

Just a few yards from here Saint Bernadette saw a beautiful woman. The Blessed Virgin Mary is beautiful! This could perhaps be excused as the natural bias of a child towards its own mother, thinking her the most beautiful woman in the world. Mary is our spiritual mother so of course we think she is beautiful! However, we need to realize that virtue is beautiful. The perfect faith of Mary shaped her beauty and leaves it undimmed after two thousand years.

Living in love with God and neighbor is beautiful. Holiness is actually beautiful! This is why Mother Teresa of Calcutta is still so vividly remembered for the beauty of her life. She was 4 foot 10 inches tall—if we can call that “tall”! She had wrinkles on her wrinkles, crooked teeth, spoke less than perfect English, and the other sisters were always trying to adjust the Indian “sari” she wore so that it wasn’t off-kilter. Wherever she went, crowds and the media greeted her as if she were a supermodel. She was “attractive” in the truest sense of the word. Others felt attracted or pulled towards her by something much deeper and more powerful than physical beauty.

Let’s contrast this with the ugliness of sin. Whenever we look at a situation broken by violence or selfishness or greed, we see the bad fruits of sin and the inestimable damage inflicted upon the sinner and anyone nearby. It is ugly and sad to see. I remember that my mother wouldn’t let us even use the word “hate”—not even when applied to broccoli or other less than savory vegetables! She firmly scolded us: “that’s an ugly word.” Sin is ugly even in the abstract. Temptations simply try to persuade us that what is actually ugly should look appealing to us—which is why theologians also call temptations “apparent goods.” This is the great lie that the Deceiver tries to convince us is true, namely that something is better than living in love with God.

God is calling us to holiness. He created us to live beautiful lives, that is to be saints and nothing less! The Blessed Virgin Mary was the first and best of Her Son’s disciples. She can teach us how to live a life faithful to Jesus and give witness to Him in our world which so desperately needs to find the Prince of Peace. We must bring the light of God’s Love into the darkness around us. Let us meditate on the beauty of Mary’s faith in just a few passages of Sacred Scripture and let Our Lady teach us.

The Annunciation

God has a plan for each one of us. The Archangel Gabriel came to the young Mary and announced to her that she was to become the mother of the Messiah. Unlikely for a teenage girl to bear the Son of God? Highly! And yet that is what God's plan was for her. We should never dismiss what God might be wanting to do with us even when it seems highly improbable or even downright preposterous to worldly minds.

In order to discover God's plan for our lives, we need to stay awake. That was the one instruction Monsignor Ritchie gave me when he invited me to give this talk: "try to keep them awake!" Today we may be physically jet-lagged after the long trip across the ocean, but that is not the greatest threat to missing God's plan. We need to stay spiritually awake every day in order to foster attentiveness to the inspirations of the Holy Spirit. All too often we fall into "my way" of doing things and forget to even ask the question about what God's plan might be.

Let me share an example of this spiritual amnesia from my ministry. From time to time, we priests get unusual requests for funeral liturgies. A couple of years ago there was an unexpected death of a young person in a family I knew quite well. The grieving parents and I were planning the funeral music when they suddenly thought of a song that seemed to summarize his life. They became insistent that since their son never quite "played by the rules" they wanted Frank Sinatra's "My Way" as part of the funeral. They thought this expressed his individuality perfectly. In normal circumstances I would have discussed the differences between sacred and secular music and how the wake rather than the Mass is the proper time for something like this. However, in this situation I just looked at them and said: "let me put it to you bluntly, 'my way' is not salvific! Jesus Christ said 'I am the Way, and the Truth, and the Life' and that is the only way that leads to Heaven." It should send shivers down our spines when someone wants to make "My Way" a theme song.

Each and every one of us is engaged in a daily battle between "my way" and God's way. Mary's "Fiat" to the angel shows us the proper response of a disciple: "let it be done to me according to your word." Jesus would later teach His disciples to pray "Thy Will be done!" Pride lurks in our hearts trying to assert "my way" over God's or anyone else's way. This stunts our spiritual growth and poisons our relationships with one another until we give ourselves over completely to God's plan. How can we arrive at this obedience of faith without envisioning God as some omnipotent general in the sky who is ordering around His troops and holding a thunderbolt over our heads in case we fail to report for duty? It comes down to trust.

Faith is more than a list of ideas about God that we acknowledge as true. Faith is a lived relationship of trust with God. Ironically, our money—which we so often mistake as a false god—has written on it this message of faith: "in God we trust." Back to basics: God loves us! Because He loves us, we should learn to trust Him. God's plan is infinitely better than anything I could ever arrange for myself!

Scripture tells us: “eye has not seen, ear has not heard, nor can the mind of man imagine what God has in store for those who love Him.”

Trust leads us to follow Christ even when we don't understand what's going on or how it can be beneficial. He did tell us to “pick up your cross” if we are to come after Him. Trust is what allows us to endure even suffering without losing faith in God. Let's be clear that in the currency of faith, the only check that God will cash is the blank check! As soon as we put limits or conditions on what we are willing to give God or how far we are willing to follow Him, we have reverted to “my way.”

God is constantly preparing us for His plan even without our knowing it. At the grotto by the river here, Mary identified herself to Saint Bernadette by saying “I am the Immaculate Conception.” From the first moment of her conception, Mary was preserved from any stain of sin. This special privilege is God's preparation for her to become the mother of Jesus. She was most certainly not aware of this preparation at the time of her conception! God's preparations often go unnoticed.

Sometimes I see someone struggling with a heavy Cross and I question the Lord: “how could you give a burden like that to this person?” And the response I get basically says: “I've been trying to prepare them for years for this Cross but they didn't want to, so now it is more difficult than it should have been.” Our carefree years ignoring dependence on God rob us of the preparation we need for the Cross. If we learn to stay close to God all the time and not just in emergencies, then we will be ready for whatever comes.

God acts in hidden ways. He isn't trying to be coy but wants to protect our humility. Imagine if her mother Saint Anne asked the young Mary to help wash the dirty dishes and the reply came back: “How dare you? Don't you see that I am being prepared to be the queen of Heaven? I'll see if some angels are available to assist you but please don't trouble me with this small stuff ever again—I'm far too important for that!” God protects us by sharing information on the need-to-know basis. We are sheltered from marveling at our awesome blessings or fearing the painful Cross that will come. We need to live in the grace of each moment. Let me be faithful to God today and trust His Providence for the rest.

The Visitation

God's plan is never just about me and Him. He creates us to be His blessings to those around us. His plan is meant to be lived out in community. We see that in Mary's visit to her cousin Saint Elizabeth. Mary has been overshadowed by the Holy Spirit and filled with Divine Love, and now she rushes to share that Love with others. Saint Paul writes about the burning need to carry this love to our neighbors: “*caritas Christi urget nos*,” that is “the love of Christ impels us!” There is an urgency to this sharing. God's Love won't just sit still in my heart.

We are meant to be instruments of God's Love in the lives of those around us. Saint Theresa of Avila wrote: "Christ has no hands in this world but yours." Blessed Gerard knew that and so when he saw a need he simply started caring for the sick. We celebrate the great anniversary this year of papal approval but the work started decades earlier without any fanfare whatsoever. Even before the First Crusade captured the city of Jerusalem in 1099, Blessed Gerard was already there running a hospital.

Modern society skews our perception of the sick and the poor by portraying them as burdens. Instead Blessed Gerard shows us that "our lords the sick and the poor" are the opportunity for us to stretch our hearts to be more loving. How will I ever overcome my selfishness if there isn't someone to demand of me a greater gift of self? Pulling the voiture of a sick person here in Lourdes should be more than a temporary good deed due to the physical and spiritual adrenalin of a pilgrimage. This service should prepare us for going out of "my way" back at home to assist those in need whom perhaps I don't even notice or "don't have time for."

We can always find excuses not to serve God or neighbor. Mary was herself pregnant. She could easily and understandably have said: "I really would have traveled across the country to help my cousin in her need but I have needs of my own right now." Instead Mary goes in haste rather than indulging the sort of procrastination which is our daily operating philosophy. Of course I will serve God and the poor when it's convenient and the stars all line up. I've blocked out the first week of May on my day planner and gladly give the Lord those days in Lourdes wearing these lovely polyester uniforms with suave berets or stylish veils. OK, what about the rest of the year? We are called to live out this vocation of love every day.

Love means putting the needs of others ahead of myself. I come in second place instead of first. I learn to deny myself so that I can make a gift of myself to the beloved. Humility is again crucial. Elizabeth asks: "who am I that the mother of my Lord should come to me?" Mary finds her greatness precisely in her status as the Lord's lowly handmaid. She has received a life-changing gift of love and so it seems right to share that love with others despite the sacrifices involved. God's Love leads me to trust His plan and it is love which should be the fruit of this faith.

Miracle at Cana

God often changes one thing into another. He changed the Cross from an instrument of punishment and defeat into a sign of freedom and victory. He changed Simon into Peter and Saul into Paul. Living in Minnesota, I often see God change water into ice. More importantly, in the Holy Sacrifice of the Mass He changes bread and wine into the Body and Blood of Christ. At Cana, Jesus performed His first miracle by changing water into wine—but not without a little prodding or so it seems.

Let me back into the explanation of this miracle by telling an airport story. Since we all just spent a significant amount of time over the past two days in the airport and

on airplanes, perhaps we can relate to the hustle and bustle of travel rather vividly right now. Over a decade ago, I was changing planes in Chicago to get to an important meeting in Washington. My flight from Minneapolis had landed late and so I was literally running to switch terminals at O'Hare airport sort of like O.J. Simpson dodging other passengers in the old television commercials. Trying that today would probably get me tackled and detained by Homeland Security. I arrived huffing and puffing at my gate just in time to see the last person walk down the boarding ramp. Breathless I handed my ticket to the gate agent and stood there gasping for air. She told me that I was too late but I protested that the airplane door was not yet closed and that I could still see my fellow travelers boarding. She looked at me with disgust and said with great feeling: "I don't have time to deal with the likes of you." With that she turned her back and walked away.

Swallowing hard my instinct to fight back—especially with the injustice of the discrimination involved and the cost of missing the first part of a rather crucial conference—I walked towards the gate where the next flight to Washington would depart a few hours later. I calmed myself by praying: "Lord, there is someone on this next flight whom You want me to meet." I got a really good seat in the waiting area and then started waiting both physically and spiritually.

As the gate's seating began to fill up, a businessman arrived and proceeded to turn the area into his own conference room. He kicked off his loafers and padded barefoot around the rest of us while talking loudly on his cell phone. It was like fingernails on the chalkboard to me. The other passengers also seemed to be quietly resenting his presumption and discourtesy. I avoided looking at him and just tried to calm my already frayed nerves. Finally we started boarding... and next to whom do you think I ended up being assigned to sit? As I realized that Mr. Shoeless was to be my seatmate, he started laughing and handed me his business card. As he handed it to me, he turned the card over so instead of his name I was looking at the Bible verse inscribed on its back. I was startled but then smiled—this was obviously the person for whom I had missed the earlier flight.

We started a pleasant conversation about matters of faith. It was not long before he said: "I really admire you Catholics in many ways and if it wasn't for what you believe about Mary I might even convert." Having grown up in the South, I am intimately aware of this line of thinking which is all too common in the Bible Belt. I asked innocently: "Why don't you tell me what you think we Catholics believe about Mary and then we can discuss it?" He proceeded with the usual "Mary is the fourth person of the Blessed Trinity, blah, blah, blah." So, I told him: "If that is what the Church taught, then I wouldn't be Catholic either! So, now I will show you from the Bible what we believe about Mary." I brought up the miracle at Cana and Mary's clear intercession there. Most importantly, I pointed out to him her words to the servants who were to fill the empty jugs with water: "Do whatever He tells you." These are her last words in Scripture—nothing else is ever added to this perfect advice which echoes down to us through the centuries. Mary always leads us to an obedience of faith in her Son.

He was astonished to say the least, having never been open to Mary as anything other than an obstacle to Jesus. I was even more shocked when I realized that for the last hour the passengers in the four rows ahead of us and behind us had been craning their necks to eavesdrop on our conversation. I think that the chiropractors' association of D.C. owed me big time! God can change anything if we let Him. He changed the prejudice of a gate agent and a missed flight into the evangelization of half of the next plane.

We never know how God will use a particular situation. It can look really bad at first but turn out to be something incredibly good. And for the record, Mary was not being pushy with God and insisting on "my way" by asking for the miracle at the wedding in Cana. She was lifting up the needs of those around her in prayer, confident that God's Love would provide for them. God can indeed turn water into wine, so we should trust that He can turn even our darkest moments into blessings.

At the Foot of the Cross

Faith should not depend on the results we receive from our prayers of petition. We are called to be faithful to God no matter what. It is fidelity to the person of Jesus that counts—and not the expectation of results from Him that too often conditions our love. Our prayers for healing or for things to work out in our relationships or on the job don't always yield the results which we desire. Mary standing at the foot of the Cross could easily have said: "This isn't what I signed up for!" If her faith wasn't strong enough to ensure a better outcome then what hope have we? Mary understood that faith isn't a ticket that she could exchange for whatever favor she wanted from God.

Sometimes we get discouraged in prayer when it seems that God doesn't answer us. God always answers us! To each and every petition He gives one of three replies: yes, not yet, or something better. Prayer is not an exercise in convincing God to see things "my way." If I pray long enough, often enough, or eloquently enough then just maybe He will relent! No—I pray not to change God's mind but to let Him change me. Saint Augustine wrote: "Your best servant is he who is intent not so much on hearing his petition answered, as rather on willing whatever he hears from You." Every prayer should always end with the acclamation of trust: "Thy Will be done!"

It is not wrong to pray for suffering to be taken away from us. Jesus prayed in the Garden of Gethsemane during His Agony: "Father, if You are willing, remove this chalice from me; nevertheless not my will but Your Will be done!" As long as we trust that God sees things more clearly than we do and thus we are open to however He wants to lead us, then we can freely pray for all sorts of things. The problem arises when we see God as a magical vending machine. I insert my prayer, push the button for whatever favor I desire, and then wait for it to appear. If nothing happens, then I begin to shake and even kick the machine. If I still don't get what I want, then I give up and declare that there is something wrong with the machine. It is exactly

this attitude which causes people to give up on prayer or even reject God entirely. God hasn't failed to hear me—I have failed to trust Him.

The pain of the Cross is real. Mary wasn't sitting at its foot happily knitting or playing canasta while whistling "only a little while longer until the Resurrection!" The Cross is heavy and we call her "Our Lady of Sorrows" for a very good reason. The Cross hurts and can discourage even the strongest among us. The most dangerous temptation is to think that God doesn't care about us or has forgotten us. We can become bitter, angry, and resentful. We can easily turn inward and have a royal "pity party" while descending into the depths of despair.

Accepted in faith, the Cross can transform us with God's grace. We have to trust His plan more than my own strength or "my way." The miracle of suffering happens when I allow the Cross to lead me to a greater dependence on God. I become more aware of the suffering of others. Knowing the pain of suffering myself, I guard my actions more carefully so that I would never inflict pain upon anyone else. In fact, I become more compassionate by seeking to alleviate the pain of others whenever possible. And—wonder of wonders—I learn the most important lesson about happiness. Pain and pleasure cannot coexist. The fleeting sense of wellbeing that the world affords flees at the first sight of pain. However, joy and suffering often do coexist. Just as the pains of childbirth do not rob the new mother of the real joy of holding her newborn, so the Cross does not deprive the Christian of the authentic peace of knowing ourselves loved by God and destined for something so much greater than all that this world can offer.

Let me share with you a story about the suffering of a little boy. Whenever my friends in Florida tease me about the very long months of snow and icy wind-chills in Minnesota, I remind them that we don't have hurricanes or alligators. I remember all too well the compelling story of a father and son who went swimming in Florida. All of a sudden the boy started screaming as an alligator had seized his legs and was trying to swim away with him. The father lunged towards his son and grabbed hold of his arms. After what must have seemed like an eternity, the alligator finally let go and the father brought the boy safely to the shore and rushed him to the hospital. As relatives and friends came to visit him, they gasped to see how the alligator had mauled the boy's legs. The little boy smiled and instead showed them his arms which were black and blue and had deep punctures where his father had dug into his flesh to hold onto him. He boasted: "Look at how much my father loves me!"

The wounds in our lives come from several sources. Some are self-inflicted when we choose to sin. Others are caused by the sins of others or by the disorder introduced into Creation by the Fall of Adam and Eve. Let's not forget that some wounds could be caused by our Heavenly Father holding onto us. We can become bruised as He grabs hold and refuses to let us slip away into the darkness. Sometimes we see Jesus simply as an obstacle to getting "my way." Dealing with Him feels like running into a brick wall and we can't get past. Indeed, the image is appropriate. If we could step back, we would see how Jesus plants Himself firmly on the edge of the cliff towards

which we are hurtling headlong. He stretches out His arms and refuses to let us pass. He loves us too much to let us drop into the abyss. We see a closed door and the wounds from banging our heads against it while He sees a safety net to keep us from harming ourselves far worse than the pain of which we complain.

A Knight of Malta came to Lourdes on this pilgrimage a few years ago. He came not as a malade even though he had serious health issues. He was a strong man but had been a hockey player in his youth. His knees were ruined by his earlier athletic activities. Still in his forties, he couldn't walk up a flight of steps without severe pain and stopping to rest halfway up. He wore leg braces and the simplest chores became an ordeal. He knew that the long flight and walking would be painful but he wanted to pray here to Our Lady. A fellow pilgrim smiled and stated: "I know what you are going to pray for—healing in your legs!" The Knight paused and then stated: "I know that my suffering has brought me closer to God. If healing would mean that I would lose this intimacy, then I don't want it. My only prayer is whatever God wants, however He sees best to help me grow in union with Him." Another way of expressing that is "Fiat" or "Thy Will be done!" He had already learned this lesson of faith from Mary.

If winning the lottery or regaining our health would be spiritually detrimental, then we shouldn't want these things. We should evaluate the fruit of the Cross and find it sweeter than the passing pleasures of the earth. The Will of God will never take us where the grace of God will not sustain us. Sometimes we need the Cross to be freed from complacency and the delusion of self-sufficiency. God loves us too much to leave our waywardness unchallenged but He also gives us the grace we need to rise to that challenge. Sometimes our bodies need medications, chemotherapy, or surgery. These things themselves can sting quite badly but they are the path back to health. Trust God that the Cross may hurt but that it is often the only path back to spiritual health!

Mother of Faith, Mother of Wayfarers, Queen of Heaven

Our pilgrimage to Lourdes is a reminder of our pilgrimage of faith through this life to our true home in Heaven. Too often even Christians can forget that Heaven is a real destination and not a fairytale. We can get way too comfortable here on earth. Like any journey, it requires preparation, guidance, and a persevering commitment to get to Heaven. Wishful thinking won't get us there! Each day we need to choose to take another step in that direction—following Jesus the Lord even when it means picking up our Cross.

God already loves us "where we are at" but He loves us too much to leave us "where we are at"—He wants to bring us where He is! The Blessed Virgin Mary shows us how to cooperate with God's grace on this journey. It is about far more than memorizing the catechism and giving our assent to all the teachings of the Church—though that is the necessary starting place. Understanding the Gospel's

requirements sets us on the path of charity which leads to holiness. A begrudging or partial following of Christ doesn't accomplish much for us or for the world.

Our beautiful mother Mary inspires us to trust God and give ourselves wholeheartedly to loving Him and our neighbor. She beckons us to the confident trust of faith and the unwavering hope that she awaits us in Her Son's glory which He offers to share with us as well. Do not be content with small dreams—God wants to help us become the beautiful people He created us to be. Who am I to aspire to become a saint? It is false humility to shirk our duty in this way! The peasant Saint Bernadette will be the first to teach us to let God work in the midst of our brokenness and limitations. The angel told Our Lady: "Nothing is impossible with God!" Each one of us is God's masterpiece and nothing less! Let us open our hearts to this greatest of miracles in which we are joined by faith to Christ and become His blessings of love to the world!