



On Pilgrimage with Mary – Our Vocation to Love

~ Reflection for the Order of Malta given by Sr. Cecilia Rose, SV

From all of eternity, God desired that *you* exist. He wanted to make you in His own image and likeness, a unique and unrepeatable reflection of His eternal glory. There is nobody like you, and there has never been nor will there ever be anyone like you. And your worth doesn't come from what you can do, or how much money you make, or who your friends are. He loves you for *you*. This is the stunning truth: every human person, no matter how strong or weak, rich or poor, healthy or sick, is loved and willed into existence by God. You are chosen and loved and looked upon with mercy.

Each of us *thirsts* to know this truth. We thirst to know that we matter, that our life has meaning, that we are good, that we are loved, that we are lovable. But the reality is, in today's busy, efficiency-driven world, **it's easy to forget who we are**. We forget that we are loved. We forget what we're made for.

That's why our community exists - founded in 1991 in NY by Cardinal O'Connor, we exist so that every person can encounter the goodness of their *own* life, and *every* person's life. Our main work is prayer, and all of our missions flow from that: we serve women who are pregnant and in need; we host weekend retreats; we speak around the country about the dignity of the human person; and we also have a mission of Hope and Healing for those suffering after abortion, inviting them to receive the Lord's mercy.

We recently had a visiting day at our Motherhouse and one of our sisters' nieces who is ~2 ½ years old, came right up to her sister auntie, went straight for her crucifix and gave it a big kiss! Then later on in the day, I asked her, "*Rose, what do you want to be when you grow up?*" She replied enthusiastically, "*A saint!*" If those two things weren't enough, right before they departed, she found a nativity set in our fake fireplace and she picked up baby Jesus, rocked him, and said, "*I love you, Jesus.*"

She's got it! One of the most important truths to remember on our pilgrimage of life, is that we're each called to be a saint & called to love! Becoming who we are called to be is a **lifelong journey** – it is an adventure of LOVE that begins at the moment of our conception. We are known by God, chosen to exist by Him and loved into existence. I would like to propose to you a guide for this pilgrimage, your specific pilgrimage here at the March for Life and for life's daily pilgrimages this side of heaven – the Blessed Mother.

I would like to look briefly with you this morning at three specific words of Our Lady, the truth or call that each word reveals and how each one is an invitation to us. The three words are: *Behold, Fiat and Magnificat!*

BEHOLD! - CREATED BY GOD

In the marvelous account of the Annunciation in Luke's Gospel, the angel Gabriel comes to Mary and tells her she is going to conceive and bear a son. The angel said to her, "The Holy Spirit will come upon you, and the power of the Most High will overshadow you." And Mary said, "Behold, I am the handmaid of the Lord; let it be to me according to your word."

What is key here is *God's individual love for Mary*, just as he knows and loves each one of us. The Lord approaches Our Lady *first*. He has prepared her from all eternity. In the relationship between human beings and God, He takes the lead. We are the *recipients* of His grace, His love, His mercy, not meriting it but receiving it as a free gift. The gift of life is totally gratuitous and unmerited. When God looks upon us, He doesn't see us as a humanity as a whole but as individuals, whom he knows, touches and creates. And so when the Lord approaches Mary *first* in love, what is her response? "Behold." We can respond in the same manner.

BEHOLD means simply to observe, to look at. How do we observe, or look at ourselves – do we see ourselves as being created by God out of love, or do we lose sight of this truth? How tempting it is to see ourselves in other ways - by our achievements or by our failures, by how successful or faith-filled our kids or grandkids are, by our job title, status or rank, by our bodies and how they look or how we wish they didn't look, by our sins, and regrets. But God



doesn't see us that way. Do we behold ourselves as beloved daughters and sons of God the Father? He is *always* looking upon us, beholding us with eyes of love and mercy!

We don't have to earn God's love! He loves us. He died for us. He wants us to be free and authentically ourselves. To not hide anything from Him. When we pray, and open ourselves to God's love, it is as though we can sigh with relief and let go of everything we carry with us... "*behold,*" How does God see us, what does he observe in us? He wants us to bring the whole of ourselves to Him, especially those parts of our hearts that we want to keep hidden – our sins, weaknesses, bad memories, things about ourselves we don't like. "Behold, I am here, Father, with this sin I can't let go of" – He wants it, because He loves us and wants us to experience freedom, light, and peace. "Behold, Lord, here I am, with this resentment, or this wound inflicted by someone I love, or this lack of trust in You, or this trait in myself I don't like..." whatever it might be. He knows and wants it all. He receives our fragile faith and hearts with tenderness. It is the most difficult for us to bring those places in our lives and hearts to Him that most need His love and healing – but He desires them the most.

Mary is our model in this – she was totally transparent with the Lord. In her "Behold," we see what we aspire to – to bring our *whole beings*, the entirety of who we are as beautiful and flawed creatures, to the light of God's love, who approaches us first. Her invitation to us is to *receive* His love first.

Once we know and deeply live from the truth of our being, created in the image of God, and loved by him, it enables us to say yes to how God and allows us to make a total gift of ourselves. Which brings us to Our Lady's next word & call:

FIAT!- CALLED TO LOVE

FIAT means, "Let it be done unto me -- Yes -- I give You permission Lord". Mary says YES to the Lord's invitation to love, in a way that she never expected, in circumstances that she couldn't have foreseen. In fact, her entire life was one big *Fiat!* His birth, at the temple with Jesus, the Wedding feast at Cana, the agony and way of the cross... She has complete trust in God and what He asks of her, and continually responds "*fiat*" - let it be done – she *knows* that He is 100% worthy of trust.

What's beautiful is the ripple effect that comes from her fiat. Her *yes* allows us to make ours. John Cardinal O'Connor's "yes" allowed each Sister of Life to say yes to her vocation. Parents pave the way for their children and on and on. Like it or not, the way we respond to Christ has an impact, an effect on others!

A couple years ago, Jane* was living with us at Sacred Heart of Jesus, our Holy Respite Convent. We invited her to join us for the March for Life. She had never been and was always up for an adventure, so she came. She was about 6 months pregnant at the time and we traveled together on a bus filled with high school students, while she herself was only about a year older than many of them (almost 18)! We let her take the lead on how much of her story she wanted to share and at the beginning, she wanted to keep it on the down-low that she was pregnant. We simply introduced her as a friend of ours. It was a true pilgrimage, extremely cold weather that year, but she really toughed it out and seemed to enjoy it.

On the bus ride home, Sr. Lucy Marie gave the students the opportunity to share any graces they received on the trip, an open mic time. Jane looked at me and panicked and said, "*Do I have to share?!?*" I reassured her that it was completely optional; *however*, if she felt called by the Lord to share, she should consider it. She breathed a sigh of relief and sat back in her bus seat. Student after student came forward and shared beautiful testimonies of how inspired they were to see so many other young people standing up for life. After about 5 or 6 students, Jane leaned over to me and whispered, "*My heart is racing,*" to which I replied, "*Do you want to share something?*"

Before answering, she got up and took the mic. "*Hi guys. You don't know this, but I'm pregnant. I'm one of the women you're here to support, to stand up for. You've each inspired me. When I told my friends I was pregnant, they said they were with me in whatever I decided to do. That's not what I needed to hear. I needed them to tell me I could do it, that I could be a good mom. Well, they didn't, but the sisters did and well, now here I am, 6 months pregnant*"

* Names were changed for anonymity.



and on a bus with you all coming home from the march for life. On behalf of all scared, confused, pregnant women -- Thank you for your encouragement and support. I can't wait to see my baby."

She received a standing ovation.

What surprised us all was the next person to come forward. A teen boy, almost sprinting to the front, took the mic and thanked Jane for sharing. Then he honestly admitted that he came on that trip in order to solidify his beliefs that it's a woman's choice and that no one can tell her what to do with her body. But hearing Jane share about what she really needed to hear and her own courage to come to the march, as a pregnant woman in need, convinced him that he was wrong. He ended by saying, "*I am pro-life!*"

Another standing ovation.

Jane chose to share part of her story on the bus. Fiat. Let it be done. We can learn from Mary that our own "*fiats*" to the Lord, our own trust in Him, extend to each moment. *In every moment, every circumstance* of life we have the opportunity to *renew our trust in Him*, to say "let it be done unto me" again, to open our hearts *again* and make ourselves vulnerable. Every time we encounter His love for us, and we realize more deeply how He desires our true good, we are enabled to move with trust and respond with our own "*fiats*" – let it be done unto me according to thy word. Mary's invitation to each of us is to **give** God permission.

The last word and call of Our Lady is:

MAGNIFICAT! - MATURING IN LOVE

As our love matures, it is purified. We will all be called at some point to suffer for the Beloved. Our love goes through a refiner's fire and results in the capacity to give even more. When we experience suffering in our lives, part of us may question the Lord. *Why did You let this happen? Where are You in this?* When a mother sees her grown children making choices that lead away from the Lord, when we have been betrayed or disappointed in relationships, in marriage or when we see an innocent child suffering. In all these situations and more, we are tempted to say that the Lord doesn't know what He is doing.

Ultimately, the answers to these questions are *beyond* our limited human capacity, but the Lord points us to something: the Cross.

In *The Christian Meaning of Human Suffering*, John Paul II says this, "Suffering is, in itself, an experience of evil. But Christ has made suffering the firmest basis of the definitive good, namely **the good of eternal salvation**. By His suffering on the Cross, Christ reached the very roots of evil, of sin and death. To the suffering brother or sister Christ *discloses* and gradually reveals *the horizons of the Kingdom of God*: ... a world being built on the saving power of love."

We can turn again to the Blessed Mother and see in her a response to suffering. She also knew fear, anxiety, frustration, confusion, the pain of loss. Think of her words to Jesus after searching for Him for three days: "*Why have you done this to us?*" In the face of it all, even without understanding "why?" she pondered what each event of her life communicated and moved forward with faith and trust. Faith means believing God is able to do something, but trust is knowing that He will. With her presence, attentiveness, empathy, she is always there in *our* Cana, sensitive to and easily perceiving our needs and asking Jesus for those things we do not even realize we lack. Through her intercession, we receive the "new wine" in our souls.

One of the women we've served experienced this in her own life – how the Lord can use our suffering, and our trust in Him, all for good: Jenna* found out she was pregnant, and she called us. Her family was against her and her boyfriend wanted her to end the pregnancy. She had already suffered an abortion and knew she never wanted to do that again. She asked herself, "*Is there another way out?*" She spent hours on the phone with us and was still scared. We offered to connect her with another woman we had served and she agreed. Jenna talked to Christine*, who spoke words of peace to her. She told Jenna, "*God chose you to be a mother, the mother of this child.*" The

* Names were changed for anonymity.



morning of her scheduled abortion, Jenna said something stopped her from going – the words in her memory: “*God chose me.*” She received grace not to go, to choose life, motherhood.

Then, at her 5-month checkup, Jenna was told by her doctor that her baby was positive for Spina bifida. Her doctor recommended genetic counseling and she immediately knew her baby’s life was endangered, she realized he was hinting at having an abortion. The doctor said to Jenna, “*What are you going to do?*” To which she replied, “*What am I going to do? I’m going to be a good mother! That’s what I’m going to do! Spina bifida or no spina bifida, I’m going to be a mother to my child!*” At the following doctor’s appointment, her doctor, looking surprised, admitted, “*Sorry, it was a false positive.*” Her baby girl was born and Jenna told us that if another girl calls tempted to have an abortion to please let her know, because she wanted to be the one to talk to her!

Fast-forward some months and Alicia* called. 19 years old, pregnant, her parents told her life was over and she was under a lot of pressure. We called Jenna. She could see herself in Alicia’s story. Jenna told Alicia, “*I’ve made both decisions. Not a day goes by that I don’t think of my first baby. You can’t make decisions based on what other people think. They forget the next day, You have to live with it for the rest of your life.*” Alicia took her words to heart, received the grace to choose life and discerned placing her child into an adoptive family.

The Lord does this in all of our lives – He takes our sins, our sufferings and if we allow His redemptive power into them, he creates bigger, more beautiful places in our hearts that didn’t exist before and brings a great good out of them. When we suffer, the Lord who loves us is inviting us to share in the sufferings he took on when he assumed our human condition. He desired to share everything that we experience but was without sin. When the Lord asks something of us that is hard to give, or we cannot fully understand and we say YES, we allow his Life and Love to come into the world. We say yes to the redemptive power of the cross that makes us foolish in the eyes of the world. But, when suffering is transformed from within, it gives us the strength and serenity to carry it and allow it to change us. It results in the ability to *praise* God amidst trials and difficulties of life.

To close, I want to turn to the scene of the Visitation where Mary arises and goes with haste to her cousin Elizabeth. This is the third and last word of Our Lady I want to offer to you – *Magnificat*. John the Baptist leaps in her womb upon hearing Mary’s voice. Elizabeth greets Mary with joy, and Mary responds with her song of praise, her Magnificat - “*My soul magnifies the Lord, and my spirit rejoices in God my Savior, for he has looked with favor on his lowly servant. For behold, henceforth all generations will call me blessed; for he who is mighty has done great things for me, and holy is his name.*”

As we see in Mary, the natural expression that springs from complete given-ness and surrender to the Lord is “*Magnificat!*” - “my soul proclaims the greatness of the Lord!” Even amidst the uncertainty of what lies ahead, in Mary’s generosity in going out to help her cousin, she experiences the joy of the Lord doing great things for her. After receiving His love, His mercy, His goodness, and trusting Him with our hearts and souls, and surrendering everything to Him, praise wells up within us. Praise, Mary’s Magnificat, is the natural expression of a heart that knows itself to be loved by God, has responded to this love and has allowed the challenges of love to bring out something of the heart of Our Lady in each one of us. Her invitation to us is to praise Him in all things. These are the aspects of love we have reflected on: that each of us is loved into existence by God, so we can say, **Behold**. We are called to love and that this requires our **Fiat**. As we allow ourselves to be changed by love, we can sing God’s praises through the **Magnificat!** I pray that each of you may be able to echo the Words of our Lady in your lives as a response to God’s love for you. To *receive* His love first, *give* Him permission and *praise* Him in all things.

To close, I invite you to pray the “Magnificat with Mary”, as we join in her continual song of praise to the Almighty in all things:

* Names were changed for anonymity.

Mary with your consent to become the Mother of God, torrents of grace poured forth upon the earth, opening up for me a path to follow.

In times of loneliness,

Mary be with me.

In times of turmoil and uncertainty,

Mary be with me.

In times of grief, loss, or illness,

Mary be with me.

In times of sadness or depression,

Mary be with me.

In times of lost plans and broken promises,

Mary be with me.

When I am anxious about the welfare of my family,

Mary be with me.

When a job or financial stress weighs heavily on my heart,

Mary be with me.

When I am discouraged by the weight of my sins,

Mary be with me.

When I am tempted,

Mary be with me.

When I am afraid,

Mary be with me.

When the Lord calls me to greater kindness and love,

Mary be with me.

When the Lord calls me to greater forgiveness,

Mary be with me.

When the Lord calls me to greater purity,

Mary be with me.

On the wings of your Fiat, Mary, I proclaim mine. Together we sing a Magnificat of praise:

For all the blessings in my life,

I praise you Jesus.

For the gift of today,

I praise you Jesus.

For the gift of loved ones,

I praise you Jesus.

For the gift of my life,

I praise you Jesus.

For creating me with a special purpose and plan,

I praise you Jesus.

For never giving up on me,

I praise you Jesus.

For Your infinite love,

I praise you Jesus.

For never leaving me,

I praise you Jesus.

For Your inexhaustible mercy,

I praise you Jesus.

For laying down Your life for me,

I praise you Jesus.

For Your presence in the Eucharist,

I praise you Jesus.

For the greater good You will bring out of everything, especially –

In moments when I feel helpless and vulnerable,

I praise you Jesus.

In the midst of uncertainty,

I praise you Jesus.

In the midst of humiliation,

I praise you Jesus.

In the midst of difficulty,

I praise you Jesus.

In the midst of what appears as failure,

I praise you Jesus.

For sending Your Mother to me in both joyful and sorrowful moments,

I praise you Jesus.

With Mary I sing:

The Almighty has done great things for me, and holy is His Name. Amen.

“In dangers, in doubts, in difficulties, call upon Mary... under her protection you have nothing to fear.”

- St. Bernard of Clairvaux