

Dear Brothers and Sisters,

Yesterday the Church celebrated the Feast of the Assumption of Mary, one of the significant Marian feasts. It is important to acknowledge the place of Mary in salvation history and how she continues to be an advocate and model of perfect humility for the Church and for us as the Body of Christ. The Gospel for this feast day is taken from Luke and it speaks of Mary's "Fiat" or "Yes!" to God's mission for her to bear His Son. It is a beautiful reflection of how perfect humility and submission to God's will can transform history and indeed our own lives. St. Luke speaks of the Visitation of Our Lady to her cousin Elizabeth. Recall that Elizabeth and Zechariah had asked the Lord over many decades for a son but it was only in her old age that she conceived a son, John the Baptist. The visitation of Mary to Elizabeth reveals to us that God is never outdone in his love and generosity. Imagine the scene of this very young girl and her much-older cousin coming together to celebrate the gift of life and the wonder of God's power to affect the seemingly impossible. Their surrender and perseverance in prayer enabled God to use them as instruments in bringing the Kingdom of God to fruition.

Against all conventional wisdom and practical earthly experience, God confounded the human condition and made real the unbelievable. Yet, in that very confounding God's grace transformed the lives of these two women and indeed all of humanity through history. This reality reminds us that God is indeed the God of all history. As human beings, we have only a finite sense of how things work; we try and control our situations and the outcomes of our actions. We even try and rewrite history to reflect our own preconceived notions of how things ought to have been and how they ought to be today. We tend to forget that God is in charge; God is the author of all life and thus is the arbiter of history. We can often rebel against this truth; thus, Mary's surrender and capitulation to history being dramatically played out in her life is so instructive as a model for us.

A most beautiful prayer always worthy of our reflection and contemplation is the Canticum of Mary read in Luke's Gospel [Luke 1:39-56]. When Elizabeth greeted Mary, she exclaimed: "Blessed are you among women, and blessed is the fruit of your womb. And how does this happen to me, that the mother of my Lord should come to me?" Mary's canticum, or Magnificat, expresses in the most beautiful way the fundamental elements of a relationship with God: humility, poverty, faith, surrender, hope...in sum, the total self-emptying of the will to self to the will of God. Mary expresses, in her thanksgiving, how God has chosen this girl of low estate to affect the greatest gift: God's gift of self through His Son. "My soul proclaims the greatness of the Lord; my spirit rejoices in God my savior...the Almighty has done great things for me and holy is his name...he has lifted up the lowly...the hungry he has filled with good things and the rich he has sent away empty...he has remembered his promise of mercy, the promise he made to our fathers, to Abraham and his children forever." Mary reflects back to us the power of God's mercy and attentiveness to our prayers. In the Incarnation, the supremacy of God's justice will reign; the poor will be fed, the imprisoned by life's circumstances will be set free and liberty will come to those to trust in God's providential and loving plan for us.

In many ways, the readings for this Twentieth Sunday in Ordinary Time are a reflection and accentuation of the readings proclaimed on the Feast of the Assumption of Mary. In today's first reading from Isaiah, the Lord says, "Observe what is right, do what is just; for my salvation is about to come, my justice, is about to be revealed." God is pointing the people of Israel to the impending coming of the Messiah, Jesus Christ, whose presence among us as both God and Man will reorient our sense of justice from that of retributive to restorative; our sense of power from that of temporal

rulers who oppress and thwart human freedom and liberty to one of servant leadership, expressed first by the Son of God himself, who washed the very feet of his disciples. St. Paul expresses this power of transformation when he says, "For the gifts and the call of God are irrevocable." Indeed, an experiential encounter of God's forgiveness and reconciliation shows that because God has loved us, who are sinners and flawed human beings, his grace is available to all peoples, in every place and for all time.

This truth is magnified in the encounter of Jesus with the Canaanite woman at Tyre and Sidon, cities outside of the control of the Roman authorities and Jewish religious leaders. The Canaanites, who settled into this geographic region, were pagans. St. Mark described the woman as a "Syrophenician." This pagan woman encounters Jesus and immediately recognizes him as the Son of God. "Have pity on me, Lord, Son of David!" The disciples try and shoo her away. To them, her persistence is a nuisance. First Jesus says, "I was sent only to the lost sheep of the house of Israel." In sum, his mission is to the Jewish people. Yet, this woman is insistent and Jesus acknowledges her faith. "Lord, help me." In this very humble exchange, her poverty allows her to surrender all to God. She is helpless and thus utterly dependent upon God for deliverance, for her and her daughter. Despite telling her that salvation is for the Jews, by use of the metaphor of food for children (people of Israel) and the dogs (pagans), even she tells him dogs eat the scraps from the table. She will not let her faith go so easily; her persistence and perseverance will be her salvation. "O woman, great is your faith! Let it be done for you as you wish." And her daughter was healed.

If this woman of deep and persistent faith, who does not even believe in God until her encounter with Jesus, has her life transformed, how much greater for we who are baptized? May this Gospel passage inspire us to renew and strengthen our own faith. May we nurture our spiritual life through reception of the sacraments, particularly reception of the Eucharist and Confession. These gifts given to us freely and unconditionally by Our Lord can guide us through this earthly life.

Please remember in your prayers several priests of our Archdiocese who have recently died. Please pray for Archbishop Cordileone and all the priests who mourn the loss of our brothers in ministry: Father Kirk Ullery, Father Ken Westray, Father Brian Costello, Father Ray Zohlen, Msgr. Ed McTaggart, Fr. Bernard Brennan, and Father Gerald O'Rourke. ***Requiescat in Pace!***

Fr. Tom