

I was born into a Catholic family – baptized within a couple of weeks of birth, Mass every Sunday even though for most of my growing-up years we had to drive 20 miles to get to the nearest church, Catholic schools through college and graduate school. But, I did not grow up with a particular devotion to Mary, the Mother of God. Maybe this was because my Mother was a convert. I think most of us know the attitude of many non-Catholics regarding the Catholic approach to Mary: “Catholics put Mary above Jesus. Catholics make Mary into a goddess. Catholics **adore** Mary.”

Thus I entered adulthood and my own motherhood, as something of a liberated woman and liberal Catholic who acknowledged that Mary was essential to salvation, but perhaps a little “overblown” in Catholic teaching and practice. At 26 I had my first child, then 22 months later my second, and in 3 year intervals we adopted a girl, then a boy, and gave birth to 2 more girls and a boy – 7 in all. As our family grew, my spiritual relationship with Mary moved to arm’s length: how could I hold much esteem and warm feelings for this woman? Of course it would be easy for her to be a saint – she had only one kid!

Sacred Scripture didn’t help a lot. First of all the passages regarding Mary are so very minimal, limited mostly to the infancy narratives where Mary is presented as an accepting and passive female. She says “yes,” to a totally unbelievable request from a perfect stranger, an angel no less, with only the slightest hesitation (“How can this be for I do not know man?”) She finds Jesus in the temple after 3 days of searching for her lost child and doesn’t scold or punish or even promise him a “time out.” She merely says, “Your father and I have been searching for you.”

However, about 15 years ago, I was introduced to the Litany of Mary of Nazareth, published as a prayer card by the organization, Pax Christi USA. This was about the time the bishops of Iowa wrote a powerful statement against the death penalty when our legislature was trying to reinstate capital punishment. Two petitions of that Litany, “Mother of the condemned” and “Mother of an executed criminal” stood out for me like bold and capitalized letters. I had a new “take” on “Holy Mary, Mother of God.”

Then, seven years ago, one of our daughters announced that she was pregnant without the benefit of husband or even a father of the child who wanted anything to do with her and the baby. At that time another petition of the Litany became enormous to me: “Unwed Mother, Pray for us.” In a way never before, the words of Elizabeth which we heard today, “Blessed is the fruit of your womb,” addressed to the young, unwed Mary, took on real-time meaning for me. That daughter turned for support to other daughters, her sisters. One, like Elizabeth, older and wiser and a woman of faith, had also waited long for a child. Her son, only 5 months old at the time, had been born after eight miscarriages. Mary of Nazareth was fully human! Her experience was **our** experience.

But our Sacred Scripture and Church tradition “sanitizes” these truths about Mary, which give her a marginalized status in her community and in ours. “Why?” we might ask? It is, I believe, because in the Gospels as in our Christian faith, in all that we know of her, Mary’s focus is Jesus, so that our own focus is Jesus. We heard in Luke’s Gospel how “Mary went in haste to the hill country,” in what had to have been a time of confusion, fear, anguish and unrest, mixed with that steadfastness, resolve and faith, which the Gospel expresses. She went to a confidante, a source of equal strength and faith, a

woman, who herself had been blessed by God in a special way, given a child in her old age. And Elizabeth greeted her “And how does this happen to me, that the mother of my Lord should come to me?” Elizabeth’s response centers not on her own child, not on Mary’s condition, but on the one who is to be born as fulfillment of prophecy, answer to hope, Savior of the World.

“Mary went in haste to the hill country” To what do we go in haste? What in our lives has the urgency implied by haste? Most especially, today, the 4th Sunday of Advent, what demands haste? Is it last-minute gifts we have to buy before 5 p.m. tomorrow? Is it the question of how we are going to keep peace among our children or our siblings & in-laws? Is it some news that has come to us that is bringing us anguish?

Though all these concerns may vie for our attention, we come together as a people of faith to celebrate Eucharist. But, we come with haste, with urgency, because it is in Eucharist that we are nurtured for the work that we share with Mary: the work of bringing Christ to the world. We come with haste, with urgency, because like Mary, who received Christ into her body, fully God and fully human, we come in humility and hope. And thus, in these last hectic hours before we once again celebrate the Incarnation, we allow ourselves some time to draw inspiration from Mary. When we reflect on Mary we know that we must strive ever to do the will of God. That means that in a few moments we will consume the body and blood of Christ; we will take him into our bodies; we will renew that we are one with him as Mary was one with him. In that communion we will be nurtured to go with haste, with urgency, to those works which make Jesus Christ manifest in the world. We will be challenged to go with haste to live in such a way that the world, like Elizabeth, knows that the Lord has come to the world: Emmanuel, God is with us. We should go from Eucharist out to those who like Mary are unwed mothers, who like Mary are political refugees, who like Mary are homeless, to those who like Mary are widowed, who like Mary are mothers of condemned criminals -- to all who like Mary share in Christ’s passion and His resurrection. We must go forth from here, with haste, resolved to bring the Savior to a world which awaits the complete fulfillment of Micah’s prophecy “for now his greatness shall reach to the ends of the earth; he shall be peace.”