

A Sea of Virtues in the Life of St Mary

The Church praises in the Wednesday Theotokia saying, “The Father looked from heaven, and found no one like you, He sent His Only Begotten, who came and took flesh from you”.

His Holiness Pope Shenouda III said, “Who from us can write a complete biography of a saint? Who can enter into the depths of a soul that has touched God and describe it to others? As for us we simply revolve around the outer orbit of the saint’s biography and describe it to the people as best we can. However for the real image of the saint which is the image and likeness of God, this is a holy of holies which cannot be approached except by prayer and contemplation”.

If we say this of the great saints, then how much greater are these words when they are applied to St. Mary, the Theotokos, and the Ever Virgin, full of Grace. In contemplating on St. Mary’s life we find that she is a treasure of virtues. For if she was able to hold in her womb He who cannot be held, she must have been arrayed with the beauty of so many virtues to make her capable of bearing such an honour.

When the church says to her, “The Father looked from heaven and found no one like you”, this is said in the present continuous tense. These words simply mean that there has never been, nor is there, nor will there ever be someone better than St. Mary. St. Mary is the saint not only of her generation, but also of every generation. St. Mary is the saint of the saints, and a mother to all saints, for it was only she who was worthy to carry in her womb the Word of God and give birth to Him.

Therefore if we talk of the virtues of St. Mary we would not end, but what we talk of here are merely a few examples, so that by prayer and contemplation we might gain an insight into her life to benefit our own lives.

The Virtue of Prayer and Praise

St Mary was the fruit, of continuous prayer. She was born in answer to the many prayers of her father Joachim and her mother Hanna for a child. St Mary also entered the temple at a very young age to consecrate herself to a life of unceasing prayer and endless worship.

Prayers in the life of St. Mary were the cause of every blessing that came upon her, and the virtues she gained. If every good virtue and gift comes down from above, then prayer is what connects us to what is above. Here is an important lesson particularly in the life of service. For every service that begins without prayer cannot be fruitful and every service that does not end in prayer its fruits will not ripe.

When the annunciation had taken place and St. Mary went to the house of Elizabeth, she spoke in prayer, praising God saying, *“My soul magnifies the Lord, and my spirit has rejoiced in God my Savior. For He has regarded the lowly state of His maidservant; 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. And His mercy is on those who fear Him from generation to generation. He has shown strength with His arm; He has scattered the proud in the imagination of their hearts. He has put down the mighty from their thrones, and exalted the lowly. He has filled the hungry with good things, and the rich He has sent away empty. He has helped His servant Israel, in remembrance of His mercy, as He spoke to our fathers, to Abraham and to his seed forever.”* Luke 1:47-57

From this short yet wonderful praise we find out that St. Mary talked about many things, and was aware of many things, and had experienced many things in her spiritual life even from a young age.

She had experienced God's:

Greatness, *“For He who is mighty has done great things for me”*

Holiness, *“holy is His name”*

Mercy, *“And His mercy is on those who fear Him”*

Strength *“He has shown strength with His arm”*

Justice *“He has put down the mighty from their thrones, and exalted the lowly”*

Richness *“He has filled the hungry with good things”*

In her praise she spoke as a daughter of the Old Testament concerning herself, *“My soul magnifies the Lord... my spirit has rejoiced in God my Savior... For He has regarded the lowly state of His maidservant... behold, henceforth all generations will call me blessed... He who is mighty has done great things for me...”* She also spoke as a mother of the New Testament concerning others, *“the proud...the mighty...the lowly...the hungry... the rich”*. St. Mary bridges the Old Testament with the New and concludes her praise by saying, *“He has helped His servant Israel, in remembrance of His mercy, as He spoke to our fathers, to Abraham and to his seed forever.”*

St. Mary's joy and praise was not just because she was pregnant and going to give birth, as was said of John the Baptist, *“And you will have joy and gladness, and many will rejoice at his birth.”* Luke 1:14, but the joy of St. Mary was for the Lord Himself, *“My soul magnifies the Lord, and my spirit has rejoiced in God my Savior”* Luke 1:47. The birth of St. John the Baptist brought joy to many, but the birth of Our Lord Jesus Christ caused the whole of creation to glorify and worship Him.

We read in the book of Acts that the disciples gathered in the upper room and, *“These all continued with one accord in prayer and supplication, with the women and Mary the mother of Jesus”* Acts 1:14.

The life of prayer, praise and worship never departed from St. Mary's life even after the Lord had departed and ascended to Heaven. St. Mary embodied the word's of St.

Paul, *“pray without ceasing”* 1 Thessalonians 5:17 and she excelled in the words of her father King David, *“But I give myself to prayer”* Psalm 109:4.

The Virtue of Silence

The Holy Bible records for us a glorious verse written by St. Luke 2:19, which says, *“But Mary kept all these things and pondered them in her heart”* St. Mary did not just keep the words and events which took place in her heart, but she pondered them as well. Pondering here means she examined them and contemplated over them. This is the true virtue of holy silence, not just to take things in, but also to take the time to contemplate on them.

St. Mary witnessed and heard many great and marvelous things. She saw the Archangel Gabriel before her, she heard Elizabeth’s greeting and St John the Baptist leapt in his mother’s womb, she saw the mute priest, she saw and heard the words of the shepherds, and the wise men from the east. She saw and heard Simeon’s words and the prophecies of Anna the prophetess. She saw His wonders in the land of Egypt and how at the age of twelve He sat among the elders and the scholars. She saw the Lord grow day by day *“and became strong in spirit, filled with wisdom; and the grace of God was upon Him”* Luke 2:40. In all this she did not speak, instead she kept all things and pondered them in her heart.

Zachariah the priest was forced to be silent as a punishment, but St. Mary was silent because it was a virtue in her. It was a virtue she chose to live for when she did not speak this was not a weakness but a strength, for her actions spoke louder than words, *“the works that I do in My Father’s name, they bear witness”* John 10:25.

There is also a time to speak. St Mary who was silent in front of St. Joseph when he doubted her honour and who was silent before Herod’s tyranny, did not fall silent when speaking to the apostles, but she told them of the things they were unaware of and they wrote their gospels in light of what she had to tell them. She did not talk about herself but focused on God, even when they wrote how rumour was spread that she was an adulteress John 8:48 she did not seek that they amend what they had written or defend herself.

The words of St. Mary are few and far between in the Holy Bible, but what is there speaks volumes. In the gospel of St. Luke during the annunciation St. Mary says two phrases, *“How can this be, since I do not know a man?”* Luke 1:34 and *“Behold the maidservant of the Lord! Let it be to me according to your word”* Luke 1:38. In the wedding of Cana of Galilee again only two phrases were recorded for her, *“They have no wine.”* John 2:3 and *“Whatever He says to you, do it.”* John 2:5. When Our Lord was aged twelve and they had lost Him in the temple she is recorded to have said, *“Son, why have You done this to us? Look, Your father and I have sought You anxiously”* Luke 2:48 and of course there is also the famous words of praise with which she

glorifies God before Elizabeth when she says, *"My soul magnifies the Lord..."* Luke 1:37. Each one of these phrases is a lesson.

Tradition also records for us one more saying which St. Mary said on the mount of Golgotha and it is remembered in the sixth part of the sixth hour. 'When the mother saw the Lamb, the Shepherd and Savior of the world hanging on the cross, she wept saying, "The world rejoices at the acceptance of salvation, but my heart burns when I look at your crucifixion which you endured for the sake of all; O my Son and my God".'

Learn from St. Mary that you excel in the virtue of silence. Discerning when to talk and when to keep silent.

The Life of Consecrated Service

Being consecrated means being separated, for the consecrated person is the person who is set apart, or dedicated for the service of God. St. Mary was consecrated to God from her birth. She was given to the temple as a child and St Luke called her a minister (servant) of the Word Luke 1: 2. She then carried the Lord in her womb, and so she was consecrated all the days of her pregnancy to the service of the Lord.

St. Mary is symbolised by the Tent of the Tabernacle of the Old Testament, because it was a place consecrated only to God, and only the high priest could go in and out of its inner most sanctum, the Holy of Holies. The same with St. Mary, who was consecrated only to God and only our Lord Jesus Christ, the high priest went in and out of her. She fulfilled the saying of the Holy Bible, *"A garden enclosed is my sister, my spouse, a spring shut up, a fountain sealed."* Song of Songs 4:12.

She is a very good example of the life which is truly consecrated to the Lord, for consecration is not what comes from the outside, such as rank, garments or vestments but it is foremost about what comes from within, and the outside then becomes a reflection of the inside, *"first cleanse the inside of the cup and dish, that the outside of them may be clean also"* Mt 23:26. St Mary was consecrated in her body, in her virginity, in her chastity, in her mind, in her emotions, in her heart, in her spirit. She was that sacrifice of life, which was acceptable to God.

St. Mary was a servant to Christ in all matters including serving Him physically as the incarnate Word of God, for she gave birth to Him, she wrapped Him in swaddling clothes, she put Him in the manger because there was no room in the place Luke 2:7. Truly the Lord who found no room in the place, or a place to rest His head, found a place in St. Mary's heart. She served Him in His childhood and in His adulthood she followed Him in His service and she rejoiced in her Saviour.

St. Mary's service also was not just directed to the person of Christ. In this St. Mary gave us many lessons on how to serve. St. Mary went to serve Elizabeth when she heard that Elizabeth was pregnant in her sixth months *"Now Mary arose in those days and went into the hill country with haste, to a city of Judah, and entered the house of Zacharias and greeted Elizabeth"*. This shows us that St. Mary was an active servant who arose immediately and with haste, not prone to delay or excuses or laziness in her service, even though St. Mary would have had the legitimate excuse that she was now pregnant and Elizabeth has many to serve her, whereas St. Mary probably had no one. Instead St. Mary was prepared to carry out the service no matter what the difficulties. She traveled all the way from Nazareth through difficult and perhaps unsafe terrain to get to Elizabeth through what the Holy Bible called 'hilly country'.

St. Mary also taught us that wherever you are, even if you are the main guest or dignitary at a function, continue to be a servant. In the wedding of Cana of Galilee St. Mary despite being a guest continued to help the servants. How do we know this? The answer is that only the servants could have known the wine had finished, and St. Mary could only have known the wine was finished if she was helping the servants for the other guests did not know what had happened, *"When the master of the feast had tasted the water that was made wine, and did not know where it came from (but the servants who had drawn the water knew), the master of the feast called the bridegroom. And he said to him, "Every man at the beginning sets out the good wine, and when the guests have well drunk, then the inferior. You have kept the good wine until now!"* John 2:9-10.

St. Mary also taught us in this miracle how a servant must keep an eye out for any shortfall in the service, and do something about it when one is discovered. Even if they can't do anything about it then at least put it before God so that He may resolve this shortfall. It may not have been St. Mary's problem that the wine ran out, but St. Mary chose to make it her problem, and in this particular situation she put the problem before the Lord, and left the solution to Him.

Finally service does not stop short at words and sermons, or preaching and teaching, for St. Mary never stood in one of these days and said a sermon, rather she herself was a sermon. When people saw her they saw the message of Christ in her, they saw in her the image of her Creator who made her in His image and likeness. They could smell the fragrance of Christ from her. St. Mary thus taught us not to worry if you cannot give a sermon, because you can be a sermon. Athenagoras, the Dean of the Catechetical College of Alexandria had a saying concerning this, "We have mute people who can give an extensive sermon, not with their tongues, but by their actions".

Maybe the greatest virtue which made the Lord descend from the highest heaven into her was that she was humble, *"For He has regarded the lowly state of His maidservant"* Luke 1:48.

Eve sinned along with her husband as a result of pride, since they wanted to become like God knowing good and evil, and they fell. On the other hand, St. Mary, the meek virgin, excelled above all, for her beauty was in her humility. If she had not been humble then the humble Lord would not have come from her.

Bearing Honor: Some might think that what we should really talk about is bearing the pain and suffering, but bearing honor sometimes requires more effort than bearing pain and suffering. As one of the fathers said, *"There are many who can bear insults, but few can bear honor and fame"*.

St Mary said in her praise that God *"exalted the lowly. He has filled the hungry with good things"* Luke 1:52-53. For the strong Christ does not strengthen the strong but the weak. The rich Christ does not enrich the rich but the poor. The righteous Christ does not justify the righteous, but He makes the unrighteous righteous.

People may bear ridicule and rebuke with joy and thanksgiving but they may not bear honor. The moment honor comes their way they become puffed up and crumble and this is to be greatly feared for, *"Pride goes before destruction, And a haughty spirit before a fall."* Proverbs 16:18.

An example of this was King David the prophet, when he was on the run from King Saul, and his son Absalom he wrote the most wondrous Psalms filled with spiritual depth. However when he found rest and slept he became lazy and fell into sin. King David was able to bear the trials and tribulations during the time of King Saul and Absalom with thanksgiving but was not able to bear the time of rest and honor.

Even though St Mary was His Mother she called herself a maidservant. St Mary considered that every blessing that befell her was from God, this is why she said, *"and He who is mighty has done great things for me"* Luke 1:49. When honor came her way she added to her humble nature more humility, and to her gentle nature more gentleness.

Denying ones self: When they lost the child Jesus and found Him in the temple *"sitting in the midst of the teachers, both listening to them and asking them questions."* Luke 2:45. St Mary said to Him, *"Son, why have You done this to us? Look, Your father and I have sought You anxiously"* Luke 2:48. St Mary knew that St Joseph was not the father of Our Lord Jesus Christ. Despite this she did St Joseph the honor of calling him His father. What is even more amazing than that is that she put St. Joseph before herself, for she said, *"Your father and I"*. This is a good example for women and men also of how to put their partner before themselves in the life of marriage.

The service of others: If we love people and were humble, putting all other before us, then the natural consequence is that we end up serving them. You cannot serve if you do not love others, and you cannot serve unless you humble yourself to serve others. St Mary went to serve Elizabeth even though she was the Mother of God, and Elizabeth was the mother of St John the Baptist. Her honor, dignity, and position did not prevent her from serving others.

The Life of Faith

Elizabeth when speaking to St Mary said, *“Blessed is she who believed, for there will be a fulfillment of those things which were told her from the Lord”* Luke 1:45.

Elizabeth looked to St. Mary and saw in her that complete faith. It was this faith which said to the angel, *“Let it be to me according to your word”* Luke 1:38.

Zachariah did not believe the word of God which came to pass in the appropriate time as for the young girl she found favor in the eyes of God. This is why the elderly priest was punished with muteness, but the lowly St. Mary, soared to the heights praising God.

The miracle of St. John the Baptist being born from an elderly man and a barren woman was not the first in history. Isaac was born from a father who was a hundred years old and a barren woman. What has never happened before in history however, and will never happen again, is the birth of Christ from a virgin without the seed of man. The easy things Zachariah did not believe, but the Virgin accepted the difficult things.

St. Mary also took blessings from the woman who said to the Lord, *“Blessed is the womb that bore You, and the breasts which nursed You”* Luke 11:27, but even then the Lord commended his mother St. Mary for something far greater than her giving birth to Him or having fed Him. He commended her for her faith saying, *“More than that, blessed are those who hear the word of God and keep it!”* Luke 11:28. St Mary heard the word of God and she kept it inside her, contemplated upon it, and acted upon it, this is the faith which hears the word of God, the faith which keeps the word of God, the faith which acts upon the word of God, the faith which bears fruit.

Faith without doubt: *“Let it be to me according to your word”*. St Mary excelled above many of the saints in having faith without doubt. You have Sarah the wife of Abraham who when she was told that she would give birth to Isaac we are told, *“Sarah laughed within herself, saying, “After I have grown old, shall I have pleasure, my lord being old also?” And the LORD said to Abraham, “Why did Sarah laugh, saying, ‘Shall I surely bear a child, since I am old?’ Is anything too hard for the LORD?”* Genesis 18:12-14.

St Thomas the apostle did not believe that the Lord had risen despite the assurances of his fellow disciples. *“The other disciples therefore said to him, “We have seen the*

Lord." So he said to them, "Unless I see in His hands the print of the nails, and put my finger into the print of the nails, and put my hand into His side, I will not believe." John 20:24-25.

St. Peter famed himself with the words, "Even if all are made to stumble, yet I will not be" Mark 14:29. Only on another occasion to be told by the Lord, "O you of little faith, why did you doubt?" Mat 14:31.

Abraham believed in the Lord and it was counted for him all righteousness. St. Peter believed in the word of the Lord and at His word he cast the nets. St. Mary on the other hand believed in the fulfillment of all those things which were told to her from the Lord, she believed in the Lord Himself, she believed in His words, she believed in the truth of those words and in His perfect timing.

Faith without questioning: Some might say St. Mary did ask the angel "How can this be..." Note here that St. Mary does not say, "How will I know this..." but rather "How can this be..." meaning how is this going to happen. St. Mary was interested in how this would take place, not doubting that this could take place. The reason for this is to ensure that the message was from God and no other. St. Mary says, "How can this be since I know no man..." yet she was betrothed to Joseph at the time and this tells us that St. Mary and St. Joseph had taken a vow of celibacy to God, and when the message is to break a vow to God then it must be examined very careful.

Once she knew the message was from God and she was not going to have to break her vow she did not question further. This is faith without questioning it is not faith which is blind, it is faith which is wise enough yet simple enough to discern what is from God and what is not. Once it has determined that a message is from God it accepts it without question. God does not want us to cancel out our human mind for God created this for us to use. He created it so that we can be wise in our faith, and not to be wise in our own eyes. It is so that we do not argue and discuss the spiritual matters in an earthly manner.

Truly theologians have argued over the matters in heaven whilst the simple have beaten them to that place. There are many virtues which we loss because we argue, discuss, and question with our human minds and our earthly wisdom. It is not strange for a barren woman to give birth, but what is strange is for a virgin to give birth. This is why when God told Ahaz to ask for a sign, it says, "Ask a sign for yourself from the LORD your God; ask it either in the depth or in the height above...hear now, O house of David! Is it a small thing for you to weary men, but will you weary my God also? Therefore the Lord Himself will give you a sign: Behold, the virgin shall conceive and bear a Son, and shall call His name Immanuel" Isaiah 7:11,13-14.

Throughout the Holy Bible we see that when God did a miracle he would also show a sign. On adding fifteen years to King Hezekiah's life the sun went back by ten degrees (Isaiah 38:8, 2 Kings 20:50).

When Saul was chosen as king over the people of Israel, Samuel the prophet said to him, *“And it will happen, when you have come there to the city, that you will meet a group of prophets coming down from the high place with a stringed instrument, a tambourine, a flute, and a harp before them; and they will be prophesying. Then the Spirit of the LORD will come upon you, and you will prophesy with them and be turned into another man.”* 1 Samuel 10:5-6

When the angels appeared to the shepherds they announced to them that there was born for them in the city of David, a Savior, who is Christ the Lord (Luke 2:11) They said to them, *“And this will be the sign to you: You will find a Babe wrapped in swaddling cloths, lying in a manger.”* Luke 2:12

Moses the prophet believed he was sent by God only after seeing the burning bush, his staff turn into a serpent and back again and his hand become leprous and healed again. Gideon did not believe God until he has seen the sign of the fleece of wool wet on the ground and the ground dry and then the ground wet and the fleece on the ground dry. Judges 6:26-40.

As for St Mary she did not see a sign nor seek a sign from God or the angel. This was because she was satisfied herself having tested this angel that he was from the Lord and she believed. How do we test every spirit? We test every spirit by seeing whether what they say conforms to scripture or not, and what the angel said was written in the prophesy of Isaiah 7:14 and knowing this St. Mary was happy to obey and give birth to God in faith without doubt, without question and without fear.

Faith without fear: She believed in complete faith, and note that it does not say that she was troubled at the appearance of the angel, but she was troubled at his saying. She was troubled at his saying because she had within her the fear of God. In the heart of St. Mary was the fear of God, but she was not afraid from God, because she loved God, and perfect love casts our fear.

When Manoah the father of Samson saw the angel of the Lord, he said, *“We shall surely die, because we have seen God!”* But his wife said to him, *“If the LORD had desired to kill us, He would not have accepted a burnt offering and a grain offering from our hands, nor would He have shown us all these things, nor would He have told us such things as these at this time.”* Jude 13:22-23.

A person who is spiritually attuned to God, and is humble, naturally becomes troubled when the words which are said carry about them a danger of pride, the angel’s greeting was one full of praise for St. Mary, saying, *“Rejoice, highly favored one, the Lord is with you; blessed are you among women!”* Luke 1:28. St. Mary instead of getting carried away with the moment, *“was troubled at his saying, and considered what manner of greeting this was”* Luke 1:39.

Many were those who got carried away with the moment and became proud and fell, and many are those who took this lesson from St. Mary for the benefit of their

spiritual lives. St Macarius the Great once had an angel of light appear to him in his cell. The angel said to him, "Rejoice Macarius for your sainthood is greater than any other". St Macarius was troubled at his greeting and replied, "I think you might have the wrong cell, for the monk next door is more saintly than I". At this the angel's disguise melted away and the angel turned out to be a devil.

It was this faith without doubt, without question, and without fear, which allowed St. Mary to see the substance of things hoped for, the evidence of things unseen. St Mary carried within her God incarnate without human seed. St Mary saw the Child in a manger who was the Ancient of Days. She fed Him who feeds all creation. She clothed Him with swaddling clothes, He who is clothed with light.

St Mary saw He who was above the angels, for a little time being made lower than the angels, and she who was a little lower than the angels by her complete faith, love and obedience to God was lifted up to be higher than the angels for all time.

The Virtue of Obedience

The life of St Mary was a life of complete obedience to God and of absolute surrender to His good will.

In the annunciation of the angel to her, St Mary obeyed what was said, even though what was said would have seemed very strange to the worldly ear and completely against the normal laws of nature. Her obedience however went beyond what was normal.

She obeyed God in where to give birth and she placed Him in the manger and feed Him. In their escape to the land of Egypt she obeyed without complaint, despite the horrendous conditions she endured, and the heartache of going from one place to another, and the persecution, and the worry of Herod's soldiers constantly hounding them. Her holy obedience also extended in allowing the Son whom she loved and cherished to go and serve in all of Judea and Galilee away from her and her home.

St Mary's obedience ruled over all of her life so that God could be all in all. Her obedience was distinct in that it was always accompanied by a peace, which seemed to pervade from heaven. It was the obedience of the children of light to their Good Saviour. This obedience has many qualities and benefits but we examine only three:

Obedience with love: The obedience we speak of here is not the obedience of servants but the obedience of children. It is the obedience that is powered and empowered by the energy of love, which burns in the heart. It is the same obedience with which the Son obeyed the Father and gave Himself for the whole world.

Obedience with truth: The obedience of a Christian is not obedience to any person, but it is obedience to the truth alone. This is why St Mary obeyed her Son. It was not because there was a blood tie or kinship between them but because Our Lord was the truth Himself. Our Lord also did not honour St Mary simply because there was a blood tie or kinship between them but because she was the best of those who knew His will and obeyed the truth that was in Him.

Obedience, which was enlightened: The Holy Bible tells us that she kept all matters, especially those dealing with salvation, in her heart. St Mary contemplated on all the events and words that came her way. She understood what the Holy Trinity intended even though it was at her human level.

The fathers always point to the obedience of St Mary and compare it to the disobedience of our mother Eve. If the first Eve disobeyed God, then the second Eve obeyed Him. If because of the disobedience of Eve the gates of paradise were closed, then because of the obedience of the second Eve the gates were opened again and we were able to eat once more from the Tree of Life.

St Mary was by the grace and the work of the Holy Spirit able to patiently struggle and obey God's will and by her exemplary asceticism she heard the voice of God in her heart and followed His commands to the letter. We too are called to this life by St Mary who said, *"What ever He says to you, do it"* and by the Lord who said, *"Blessed are your ears for they hear"*

Full of Grace

Blessed are you who are full of grace...

St Mary was full of grace, and here we point out that this was not just a matter of grace bestowed upon her by God. If it were a matter of grace being simply bestowed by God without any personal struggle or worthiness, God would have bestowed that grace on many, if not everyone. He could have even bestowed it on our mother Eve and He could have been born from her and saved Adam straight away.

St Mary was full of grace because of her being responsive to the work of God in her life and that is why she found favour before God's eyes, and she was worthy to carry and give birth to the word of God.

One of the fathers said of her, "You are finer than the heavenly hosts, and more honoured than the Cherubim, and exceed the Seraphim. You are greater than the ranks of the spiritual angels. You are the pride of our kind. You are favoured more than all the creation, which is seen, and unseen by the greatness of the Word of God who came down and was born of you. For this reason your intercession is strong before Our Saviour."

The church and the home should work together to be a place where the person is filled with the grace of God, for the home should be an extension of the church, and the church an extension of the home. This is the clear example given to us by the life of St. Mary and the result was that she was full of grace.

Glory is to God forever. Amen.