



Ave Maria

## A Few Thoughts on the Hail Mary

In recent years the words "Hail Mary" have been used in secularist parlance to express an adventurous or risky activity. It has been used to describe a hazardous military maneuver, or a last-ditch plan by the losing team of a football game, to pull up even, or maybe win by the dubious attempt. The success of such an attempt may be thought of as somewhat miraculous, when considering the long odds of the situation.

Mary has always been associated with (*cum miraculis*). Sandra L. Zimdars-Swartz's. *Encountering Mary*, gives us a chronological sequence of the modern apparitions attributed to the Virgin Mary, from La Salette, to Medjugorje.

The wonderful scholarship of Joroslav Pelikan, Stirling Professor of History Emeritus at Yale, has also given us a companion volume: *Mary Through the Centuries*, 1996, as a follow-up of his highly acclaimed: *Jesus Through the Centuries*, 1985.

It is truly amazing that what has developed into Mariology, was taken from such meager writings about her in Scripture. One thing is for certain, no other woman in history has had more of an influence on people than has Mary. Next to Jesus himself she is venerated (but not adored) more than any other saint, sage, king or prophet; as she herself had predicted in her Magnificat.

“Yes, from now onwards all generations will call me blessed.”

Devotion to Mary grew during the middle ages when she became, in theological parlance, the (*mediatrix*) of God's grace as the "Mother of Jesus" and therefore (*Theotokos*, *gr.*), The Mother of God; since Jesus is God, and the second person of the Trinity. The entire edifice is

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founded on the Incarnation, as the Nicene Creed clearly states:

“For us men and for our salvation he came down from heaven: by the power of the Holy Spirit he was born of the Virgin Mary and was made man.”

To this day it is customary to bow during the recitation of these phrases in honor of one of the most delicate doctrines of Christendom. There has always been some trepidation in the church when dealing with matters of Mary.

Mary was a human being with parents just as you and I. Tradition has it that they were St.'s Joachim and Anne; though St. Peter Damian warns that we should consider it "a blamable and needless curiosity to inquire about those things that the Evangelists did (not) deem it advisable to relate, and, in particular, about the parents of the Blessed Virgin Mary." The tradition seems to have risen solely from apocryphal texts.

Devotion to Mary has continuously grown over the centuries, and the Immaculate Conception (December 8) as well as the Assumption (August 15) became dogmas of the faith by papal decree. Specific devotions to Mary as the Queen of Heaven; as the Patron of the universal church; as The Paragon of Chastity, in addition to being the "Mother of God," have in fact been on the increase. Love and loyalty to Mary will never decrease among the multi-millions who pray for her intercession.

The well known (Ave Maria) is likely to be the most repeated prayer of all time. Certainly, the Rosary is one devotional practice popular since the twelfth century. Much of the rosary's promulgation - which contained the Angelic Salutation from Luke's Gospel and the words of Elizabeth from Mary's Visitation, took place in Carthusian circles, according to the Catholic

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Encyclopedia, "However, the term Dominican Rosary is very accurate as the friars of that order did the most to make it a general, popular prayer by propagating it through their preaching. "

The Memorare, another intercessory prayer asking Mary's help, appeared around the fifteenth century. It is not so much repetition that today's faithful is interested in, but more of an understanding of the meaning behind the words being repeated. Let us parse the "Hail Mary" and try to add a bit more significance to the words that too often only trip off the tongue or flash across the brain.

### **Hail Mary ...**

Hail: in our modern sense of understanding merely sounds like an antique greeting, like "Hail to the Chief," or "hail, hail, the gang's all here!" Actually, the word (Hail) is a more important acclamation, indeed, much more than just a greeting. It is more like the German (heil) nt-Ie)s well-being, from which (heilig) comes, meaning holy. Heiligabend in Christmas Eve; Heilige(r) mf saint; heiligenshein in halo; heiligkeit f holiness. In the latin, Ave comes from aveo - ere tr to desire, long for, crave.

The call to Mary was said to be delivered by St. Gabriel the Archangel. Gabriel (Heb. meaning "man of God"). Gabriel in scripture is known as a revealer and heavenly intercessor. He is one of those who is said to "stand in the presence of God." It seems fitting that God's "intercessor" would be the one to announce to Mariam of Nazareth, believed to a "fourteen" year old virgin, that she had been chosen to become the mother of the Christ; and in time would become the most prominent intercessor between the Deity and us, pleading our causes before her Son and Father, in the interest of love and mercy.

**...full of grace,**

Is it any wonder that Gabriel would have added to the salutation the phrase (full of grace)? What unspeakable favor Mary must have had, to become the means for the most momentous event, next to creation; that is, God taking on human form - at the transition between the old covenant (with God through Israel and Abraham) - and the new covenant (with God and all human beings through Christ the Lord). It was Mary that brought us the Savior who had been promised, the Messiah. The grace she had, had to have been in such abundance - that it would be absurd to think that there could have been any (sin) about (her) coming into the world. It would be almost impossible to come to any other conclusion - other than the one reached, very slowly through tradition, and which became known as the Immaculate Conception; promulgated in the papal bull (*Ineffabilis Deus*) on December 8, 1854, formally recognizing Mary the Queen of All Saints; the Queen of Heaven and Earth. The most unique human being of all those who have ever (been) born or (will be) born of man and woman. She is both mother and child of her creator, the vessel of (God made flesh) by her concession.

**The Lord is with you ...**

A full measure of the grace of Almighty God was activated by the Spirit and perfected in Mary as the love existing in the Trinity, brought Christ to humanity. An egg was fertilized which was to become Jesus of Nazareth, as the Incarnation of God became a reality. Redemption was at hand. The course of human events was redirected from the time of the first man, as the Deity took upon Itself the form of its own creation. Out of light had come life, out of the inspiration of the breath of life the infusion of the Spirit, and now from a single, holy, unstained human being, the Son, begotten eternally

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by the Father (who is one being with the Father), by the power of the Holy Spirit became one of us. This radical event raised the worth of humankind beyond even its own comprehension, by setting Love as the pre-eminent value. The unity of the spirit was made complete (ipso facto) as the Deity became its own creation.

### **Blessed are you among women**

No other faith or trust in God, except for Jesus himself, could ever equal Mary's measure of obedience and acquiescence. She took nothing for herself except the will of God. With joy she praised the greatness of the Lord, and welcomed her humiliation as a most humble servant; for the Almighty was about to come as the deliverer of Israel, his servant, according to the promises he made of his mercy to Abraham and to his descendants forever.

### **and blessed is the fruit of thy womb ...**

The fate of the world was sealed - as Mary visited her cousin Elizabeth who had also been graced with the success of a pregnancy, which Gabriel had announced to her elderly husband Zachariah. A son (John the Baptist) was to prepare the way of the Lord to save Israel from the "powers of oppression" and set them free. As a greeting from Mary was heard, the child in Elizabeth's womb leapt - and she exclaimed:

“Of all women you are the most blessed, and blessed is the fruit of (your) womb” Jesus ...

The child Jesus came into the world in a cave where animals were kept, on a hillside near an inn at Bethlehem, the city of David, as was forecast. Jesus was wrapped in swaddling cloth and placed in a manger. Mary had delivered the world its Savior. The “lamb of

God” was born (of a virgin) in the proper place, and significantly placed on a feeding trough.

### **Holy Mary mother of God...**

For those of us who believe, certainly through no reason or logic - but simply through the same grace that infused Mary, that she became “the mother of God” we would obviously have a deep and abiding reverence for her in our “hearts.” How could she not be holy, or even the epitome of holiness, or even more, perhaps the holiest of all creatures ever born into the world, because of her pre-eminent status as the (deliverer) of the one who was to deliver us all.

To speak of the “Mother of God” sounds like a total contradiction. God had no progenitor; but Jesus did, and that was Mary, by the Spirit, in the interest of Love. Love persisted in the redemption of his creatures. The Love between Father and Son was expressed in human” terms by the Incarnation: "Be it done unto me according to your (Word)." Here, the (Word) of God chose a special vessel through whom he would be delivered to us. In this sense the Son chose his own mother. Most (pragmatists) would think that insane - but lead by faith, and simply out of the love of God, that is precisely what Mary became; the mother of God! She accepted it without question.

For her there was only total surrender, and as a result, for us, the option of salvation. The Spirit delivered the Son, then the Son sent the Spirit to be known by the Apostles, through them the Spirit would "fill the hearts of all the faithful." The Father, the Son and the Spirit - One God - came to us in the person of Jesus Christ - through Mary. We can say “Holy Mary mother of God” in perfect reverence. We and the Holy Spirit, the Body of Christ in Communion, make up the Church - because of Mary's (yes) to the will of God in the truest sense .

**...pray for us sinners ...**

"Let anyone who is without sin cast the first stone"! With this familiar phrase, Jesus spoke to us all. A woman caught in adultery was about to be killed according to the law. Jesus, having pity on the "sinner," and full of mercy, turned the tables and brought those Pharisees who were about to stone her, around to confronting themselves. Each one, peering into himself, dropped the heavy rock at his own feet. Recognizing their own transgressions against the law, they were not able to execute (another) who was guilty of breaking a commandment. With this lesson he showed his total abhorrence for hypocrisy. How men and women can be absolutely merciless to one another, has been one of the critical questions of our age, or for that matter, any age. The answer lies in the ancient human understanding of a vengeful God, a God who showed no mercy. This was the god created in the minds of men, the god we have seen so often in history, and in this present day by the actions of terrorists.

A merciful God does not ask his children to kill for his sake; when he alone could eliminate the whole human race in the blink of an eye - he does not ask for "an eye for an eye." We are all guilty of transgressions against God's law - and what law might that be? Clearly it is the (love) of God and the love of neighbor as written in Deuteronomy and Leviticus as well as by the Evangelists, the law that Jesus taught, which our souls understand, but which our "animal nature" suggests we not accept. When acting (righteous) with others it is imperative we see our own faults and "take the beam from our own eye" The idea of thinking oneself righteous, is likely one of the most pitiful tricks the human mind can play on a person. Righteousness almost invariably looks outward - without bothering to inquire within. The "mother of God" never gave a second



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thought to her being anything more than a servant of God. She was humility personified - to the degree that God chose to become her child. Wouldn't it be a certainty that the "Queen of Heaven" would intercede for those who beg for mercy from "Christ the King," and that they be assured of peace and compliance?

To demonstrate the power of the "Son of man" on earth, Jesus cured the lame man after expressing his power over sin. "Take heart, son; your sins are forgiven." "For which is easier, to say, 'Your sins are forgiven,' or to say, 'Stand up and walk'? The Scribes were astounded when the man picked up his bed and walked home. Jesus performed this miracle because of the faith of the man's companions, and out of divine mercy. How much more would he comply to his mother's request on our behalf. Insane concept? - no, the miraculousness of faith? - yes! One who understands forgiveness understands that. "I desire mercy, not sacrifice. For I have come to call not the righteous but sinners."

### **... now and at the hour of our death ...**

It is interesting that the Blessed Mother, to whom we address our supplications regarding our present and future life status has been deemed exempted from death. With the Dogma of the Assumption, defined in *Munificentissimus Deus*, issued by Pius XII, November 1, 1950, which means: "She did not have to wait until the end of time for the redemption of her body," so it is assumed she was taken directly, body and soul, into heaven. The (reason) for this is stated very clearly by St. Robert Bellarmine (1542~1621): "My soul is filled with horror at the thought that this virginal flesh which had begotten (God), had nourished and carried him, could have been turned into ashes or given over to be food for worms." Now - there is no scriptural notations in the canon to support that conclusion, and it certainly appears that mere men are thinking for God. The only pleonastic

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references to Mary's life and times are given, as we've said, in apocryphal texts. With that said, one cannot help believing with St. Robert, that accepting the "dogma" of the Immaculate Conception, would make it difficult (not) to accept the Assumption. Pius XII makes his case based on solid tradition and the positive opinion of almost the entire Church hierarchy and people of God. We accept the concept that Mary, who delivered the most precious gift to mankind, its Lord and Savior, had to have been in every way unique. The faithful in Christ, by the gift of the Spirit, who offer adoration and love to the Father through the Son in the Spirit do not find it difficult to (assume) Mary was taken directly to a prominent place with the Deity, and avoided bodily disintegration. If she did die, she was immediately taken to heaven, body and soul, having followed the course of her Son, our Redeemer. We ask her to "Pray to the Lord our God for us," especially at the hour of our death that we be made truly "worthy of the promises of Christ." There is always some consternation human beings have about their own demise. It surely eases troubled minds when we feel (secure) that the blessings of Our Lady, will help bring us to everlasting life.

### **Amen.**

On a personal note, it has often troubled me why my most marvelous teacher, Teilhard de Chardin, took the doctrines so lightly. I have to suppose he had major problems with "Original Sin" and therefore both the Immaculate Conception and the Assumption had not too much appeal for him. However, his extraordinary love and commitment to Our Lord Jesus, which, indeed, far outweighed the love of many, many others, has hopefully (through the mercy of God), guided him to the celestial home we (all) hope to attain.

As for us "banished children of Eve," we cry to Mary, sending up our sighs when we observe the lack of love

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consistently displayed in today's troubled world. Though I must say, having read a bit of history, it has hardly ever been any different. Those of us who abide by Mary, hope she will turn her eyes of mercy towards us, and - after this - show us the blessed fruit of her womb, Jesus.

“O Mary, conceived without sin, pray for us who have recourse to thee”! “Pray for us, oh holy mother of God, that we may be made worthy of the promises of Christ.”

If the whole Church is not trustworthy for us - may “Mary, help us— help, we pray.”