

“Mary, My Mother” (Homily)

Deacon John Fulton, St. Kevin Roman Catholic Church, Warwick, Rhode Island
January 1, 2017 – Solemnity of Mary, Mother of God (Lectionary: 18; Luke 2:16-21)

I, for one, have had many mothers--good ones and bad ones, loving ones and unloving ones, wise ones and foolish ones--but only one has been there for me, day after day, season after season, throughout the summers and winters of my life, accessible, patient, loving, faithful. Her name is Mary, and I would like you to know how we met, how our relationship grew, and how Mary became my Mother.

I met Mary one day long ago in the Bronx. My grandfather had taken me for the weekend, and I was staying in the little apartment on the 4th floor of 3348 Hull Avenue. Like other four-year-olds, I liked to explore, and my grandfather's apartment was filled with interesting things, many of them from the Poor Clares for whom he worked in Throgs Neck. Among the many prayer cards and medals from the Sisters was a small plastic statue, a statue of a beautiful lady. It fit right into my little hand, and I frequently gravitated to it, and held it. The statue of the Lady was cool and smooth. The Lady was smiling. She wore blue and white. Holding her made me feel good. My grandfather was a Swede, a man of very few words, but one day, as I held the statue, he said, "That's Mary. She's from the Sisters. Do you like her?" "Yes, Grandpa!" I replied. "That's good," he said, "because she loves you." My grandfather's words soothed me, and I believed him, even though I didn't know who the beautiful lady was, or why she loved me.

Until my tenth birthday, I visited my grandfather regularly. Sometimes he would come up and get me, and sometimes my family would visit. Regardless, every time we visited, I would find the lady, and hold her, and remember my grandfather's words. My grandfather died when I was eleven, and what became of that little statue I never knew, though I can feel it in my hand to this very day.

Lacking that beloved image, I sought others, and found them, of course, almost everywhere. I also sought the beautiful lady in books: the Gospels, of course, but also the biographies of saints (Saint Bernadette of Lourdes is a personal favorite) and also Bishop Fulton Sheen's great ode to Mary, entitled *The World's First Love*.

Somewhere along the way, I adopted Mary as my Mother--or she adopted me--I'm not sure which--but in either case, she became very real to me. She became my Mother. I began *living* the Memorare: In times of trouble or indecision I flee to my Mother's protection, implore her aid, and seek her intercession.

Once, I was so troubled that I fled in the night to a church to sit at the feet of my Mother's image. I arrived distressed, fearful, and confused. Her image comforted me, allowing me to focus. I asked my Mother to pray with me. We prayed together for hours, it seemed. I left the church in peace. My prayer--our prayer--was answered mercifully.

Now, in times of great trouble, I seek my Mother's image. It comforts me, as that little statue did, long ago.

Once, I struggled mightily with a decision that changed the course of my life forever. It was this very day, 16 years ago, The Solemnity of Mary, Mother of God. As I walked into church that day--a Roman Catholic church in our diocese--I struggled with a great desire to become a Catholic, because I feared offending my Protestant family, were I to convert. Even my pastor's gracious invitation to become a Roman Catholic hadn't won me over. But Mary did. As I listened to the homily in church that January 1st, I felt my Mother's presence, and as I left the church, I felt peace. I immediately wrote a letter to our deacon, asking to be received into the Catholic Church. I entitled the letter, "Mary, Mother of God."

Now, in times of indecision, I seek my Mother's guidance and advocacy. I see myself sitting at my Mother's feet in that grotto at Lourdes--not as it is now--but as Bernadette found it so long ago--dark and wet and musty. And my Mother's grace illuminates that dark place, and the decisions ahead, and the way I must travel.

This Sunday, at the invitation of our bishop, we begin a year dedicated to the Blessed Virgin Mary--Mary, *our* Mother. 2017 marks the 100th anniversary of the appearance of our Lady to the children at Fatima, and our bishop has invited us to engage in special devotions to Mary throughout the year. As we do so, I beg you to remember my story: of the Poor Clares and their little plastic statue; of my grandfather and his simple words; of my curiosity and the stories it sought and found; of my adoption and how important it has been to me.

Give Mary to *your* children and grandchildren. Explain her love for all of us, *her* children. Nurture curiosity about her life, her role in God's plan. And *believe*. Believe in the mystery!

Mary and her Son will do the rest.

Luke (2:16-21)

The shepherds went in haste to Bethlehem
and found Mary and Joseph and the infant lying in the manger.
When they saw this, they made known the message
that had been told them about this child.
All who heard it were amazed
by what had been told them by the shepherds.
And Mary kept all these things,
reflecting on them in her heart.
Then the shepherds returned,
glorifying and praising God
for all they had heard and seen,
just as it had been told to them.

When eight days were completed for his circumcision,
he was named Jesus, the name given him by the angel
before he was conceived in the womb.