To Holy Mary, cause of our joy

(Luke 1:39–45)
As I prepared the first chapter of this book, I had to dig deep in my memory. I was able also to consult other resources to corroborate details. In fact, I called Hannah on the phone. (She’s now flourishing as a wife and mother.) She remembered everything well because her experience at the orphanage in Bethlehem had been transformative for her. She had returned from that trip and immediately organized a fund-raiser for her beloved orphans in Bethlehem.

What happens in Bethlehem doesn’t stay in Bethlehem. It goes home with pilgrims. That was certainly true of the Holy Family. “Mary kept all these things, pondering them in her heart” (Luke 2:19).

With those words Luke the evangelist ends his narrative of Jesus’s conception, birth, and infancy. A few paragraphs
CHAPTER

5

MARY: CAUSE OF OUR JOY

She has inspired many of the greatest works of poetry, music, painting, sculpture, and monumental architecture. Hers is the expressive power that animates the Pietà of Michelangelo. To her honor, the architects of the Middle Ages raised the great cathedrals of Chartres and Notre Dame. The Sistine Chapel was dedicated to her memory. Countless voices call her name to the melodies of Schubert’s or Bach’s “Ave Maria.” She and her divine child are at the center of Raphael’s great Sistine Madonna; and she is the subject of masterworks by artists from Giotto, Duccio, Cimabue, and Leonardo da Vinci down to Picasso and Salvador Dalí.

The Church invokes her under dozens of titles, some poetic and some theologically technical. She is the Blessed Virgin, Mother of God, Queen of Angels, Immaculate
Conception, Refuge of Sinners, Comforter of the Afflicted, Mystical Rose.

All those names and cultural artifacts have formed us as Christians, and they have formed our impressions of her. They are like the gold that the early Christians sometimes used to encase the relics of the cross. They’re beautiful and fitting, but they can also have the unintended effect of obscuring what they were fashioned to honor. The cross that bore our salvation was made from common wood.

Similarly, the Ark of the New Covenant—the vessel of honor—the young woman who bore our salvation from the moment of his descent from heaven was, in many respects, an ordinary girl from a no-account place.

If we want to know the Blessed Virgin as she truly is, we must come to see her as she was—before anyone knew the magnitude of her glory—as she grew to maturity in the dusty village of Nazareth.

Nazareth is today the largest city in the northern district of Israel. Its population falls just shy of a quarter of a million people. In the first century before Christ, however, it likely had no more than a few hundred inhabitants, most of them living in stone caves cut into the hillside. Nazareth surely enjoyed some economic benefit from Herod’s nearby building
projects, but still the village made hardly any impression on outsiders. Nathanael’s remark to Philip, at the beginning of Saint John’s Gospel, was probably a typical city dweller’s reaction to a backwater village: “Can anything good come out of Nazareth?” (John 1:46).

The root of Nazareth seems to be the Hebrew word nezer, which means “branch.” We don’t know how the village got its name. But Christians saw in Nazareth a fulfillment of one of the prophet Isaiah’s oracles about the Messiah: “There shall come forth a shoot from the stump of Jesse, and a branch shall grow out of his roots” (Isaiah 11:1). Since Jesse was the father of King David, the “stump” clearly symbolized his family tree, which had been reduced almost to nothing. Out of the stump would come a “branch”—the Son of David who, according to the verses that followed, would be filled with the Holy Spirit and would inaugurate an age of peace, not only for Israel, but for the Gentiles, too. “In that day,” Isaiah foretold, “the root of Jesse shall stand as an ensign to the peoples; him shall the nations seek, and his dwellings shall be glorious” (Isaiah 11:10).

Today the centerpiece of Nazareth is the Basilica of the Annunciation, built over the “venerated grotto”—the remains of the humble cave that served as the childhood home of Mary, the Mother of Jesus. The church’s altar is inscribed with the Latin words Verbum caro hic factum est—“Here the Word became flesh!”
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It was there, in a well-swept, well-kept cave, that “the angel of the Lord declared unto Mary, and she conceived by the Holy Spirit.”

We know little with certainty about Mary’s childhood—only what we can surmise from a careful reading of her words recorded in the Gospels. From her words it’s clear that she grew up in a pious household. She knew the Scriptures of Israel, the books we know as the Old Testament, and she could quote them and allude to them with ease. It is unlikely that she owned any books; she would have known the Bible mostly from its proclamation in the local synagogue, and from dinnertime discussions at home and with her friends. She had well-developed habits of prayer, and she did not stumble or hesitate as she conversed with an archangel.

In artwork she is often shown at work, and that is surely an accurate depiction. Home life in those days was labor-intensive. There were no appliances to take care of common tasks—cooking, cleaning, laundry—and these required dedicated attention.

When we meet her in the Gospels, she is already “betrothed” to a man. So she was probably in her early teens, perhaps as young as thirteen. Life expectancy was around thirty for men and less for women. Girls usually entered arranged marriages shortly after puberty and menarche. The men they married were usually at least a few years older, having proven themselves capable of supporting a family.
We know, too, that Mary enjoyed a close family bond with Zechariah and Elizabeth, who were her kin. We don't know the degree of their relationship. They may have been Mary's cousins, or even her aunt and uncle. Her bond with them was intimate despite the fact that they lived almost ninety miles away, to the south of Nazareth, in the village of Ein Karem. When Mary heard that Elizabeth was pregnant, she wanted to help her kinswoman, so she made the arduous journey "with haste" (Luke 1:39).

There are many possible explanations for the closeness of Mary and Elizabeth. If the older couple had always lived in Ein Karem, Mary may have known them from her family's thrice-yearly holy-day pilgrimages to nearby Jerusalem (for the feasts of Passover, Weeks, and Booths). It could be, too, that Zechariah and Elizabeth had once lived in Nazareth and only late in life moved to Ein Karem to be closer to Jerusalem for Zechariah's priestly service.

As a priest, Zechariah held a hereditary office reserved to men from the tribe of Levi. Only the Levitical priests could perform the rites and offer sacrifice in the Temple. The Levites had no territory of their own. Instead they were dispersed through the lands of the other tribes. Adult males began their priestly service later in life, organized into one of twenty-four "divisions," and their terms of service rotated through the
year. Many priestly families, like Zechariah’s, chose to live near Jerusalem for the sake of their ministry.

An ancient tradition holds that Mary herself served a role in the Temple; and if that is true, she could have stayed at the home of her relatives during her term of service.

What could such a role have been? The Protoevangelium of James, probably composed around AD 125, says that from the age of three through twelve, “Mary was in the temple of the Lord as if she were a dove that dwelt there, and she received food from the hand of an angel.” The text describes Mary performing menial tasks, such as fetching water, but also skilled craftwork. She is chosen from among Israel’s consecrated virgins to weave the intricate veil for the Temple’s holy of holies.¹

Though the Protoevangelium was composed late, compared to the Gospels, it is still one of the earliest Christian documents that have survived to our day. It has neither the authority nor the understated quality of the canonical Gospels. It does, however, tell us much about what Christians believed about the Blessed Virgin not long after she ended her earthly days (and the traditions they preserved). And many of the details are not as far-fetched as the Protoevangelium’s breathless style might suggest.

The Torah speaks, after all, of “ministering women who ministered at the door of the tent of meeting,” the precursor to Israel’s Temple (see Exodus 38:8). The same office
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appears centuries later, during the time of Eli (see 1 Samuel 2:22). The Second Book of Maccabees, written in the second century BC, confirms another detail of the account, as it speaks of consecrated virgins who are cloistered within the Temple and who dedicate themselves to prayer (2 Maccabees 3:19–20). Similarly, the Apocalypse of Baruch, probably composed in Hebrew in the first century AD, speaks of the Temple’s “virgins who weave fine linen and silk with gold of Ophir.”

We know that Mary had family connections to the Jerusalem priesthood. We know, furthermore—from several sources—that young women offered dedicated service of prayer at the Temple. Our sources attest to this custom in the times of Moses, David, and Jesus.

We can, therefore, at least acknowledge the possibility that Mary spent part of her childhood in service at the Temple, as the apocryphal accounts claim she did, and that she was consecrated for this purpose.

In any event, we can be sure that Mary, having lived in the home of the priest Zechariah, was familiar with many of the customs of priestly service; the traditions of the Jerusalem Temple must have influenced her piety, and in turn the piety of the household she kept as a wife and mother.
The most controversial aspect of Temple service—and the most controversial aspect of Mary’s special role in the Messiah’s story—is virginity. As we mentioned in our chapter on Jesus’s genealogy, non-Christians called Mary’s chastity and honor into question as early as the first and second centuries. The *Protoevangelium of James* thought it helpful to invoke the testimony of a midwife on Mary’s behalf.

The fact of Mary’s virginity was clearly important to the first Christians. Saint Matthew’s Gospel sets it forth as the fulfillment of Isaiah’s prophecy of the Messiah: “All this took place to fulfill what the Lord had spoken by the prophet: ‘Behold, a virgin shall conceive and bear a son, and his name shall be called Emmanuel’ (which means, God with us)” (Matthew 1:22–23, quoting Isaiah 7:14).

Matthew quotes the oracle as it is found in the Septuagint, the most ancient translation of the Old Testament into Greek, which was completed in the third or second century BC. Why is this important? Because the Septuagint renders the Hebrew word *almah* with the Greek word *parthenos*—virgin—whereas later (post-Christian) Jewish translations render it as “young woman.” This led Saint Justin Martyr and Saint Irenaeus of Lyons, both writing in the middle of the second century AD, to accuse the Jews of their time of changing Scripture to accommodate their anti-Christian polemics.¹

Now, *almah* can be rendered as either “virgin” or “young woman.” The terminology in other languages is similarly
ambiguous—the German jungfrau, for example. But what did Isaiah intend? And what did the Jews of the first century BC understand by the oracle?

We cannot read Isaiah’s mind, but we can read his context. The passage opens with the challenge: “Ask a sign of the LORD your God; let it be deep as Sheol or high as heaven” (Isaiah 7:11). He seems to be talking about a momentous sign, something indisputably miraculous. A virgin bearing a son would indeed be such a singular event. A “young woman” bearing a son would be unremarkable and underwhelming, as signs go.

Thus we can probably trust the authority of the Septuagint—which enjoyed a semi-official status in the Jewish diaspora and was uninfluenced by later Christian-Jewish disputes.

Mary’s virginal motherhood is a sign. It is not, however, a statement against the goodness of sex, as some heretics later claimed it was. It is rather a guarantee of God’s fatherhood—God is the only possible father of Jesus—and at the same time it is recognition of Mary’s special status as the mother of the Messiah. She was, as such, a vessel of the divine. Her body was, in a sense, like the golden vessels dedicated for Temple service. It was forbidden to use such chalices and plates at even the most dignified royal banquet. Likewise, her womb, having borne the Savior, could not return to ordinary activity, no matter how good, no matter how blessed.
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Her perpetual virginity was fitting and proper to her unique role in the history of salvation. It is interesting to note that for the early Christians she was "the Virgin"—as if she had a special claim on the noun and required the definite article. It is the same grammatical construction found in the earliest Hebrew manuscripts of Isaiah 7:14.

But was Mary’s virginity chosen? Had she already committed her life to God before the angel visited her?

Mary’s dialogue with the angel is indeed curious.

In the sixth month the angel Gabriel was sent from God to a city of Galilee named Nazareth, to a virgin betrothed to a man whose name was Joseph, of the house of David; and the virgin’s name was Mary. And he came to her and said, “Hail, full of grace, the Lord is with you!” But she was greatly troubled at the saying, and considered in her mind what sort of greeting this might be. And the angel said to her, “Do not be afraid, Mary, for you have found favor with God. And behold, you will conceive in your womb and bear a son, and you shall call his name Jesus.

“He will be great, and will be called the Son of the Most High; and the Lord God will give to him the throne of his
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father David, and he will reign over the house of Jacob for ever; and of his kingdom there will be no end."

And Mary said to the angel, "How shall this be, since I have no husband?" And the angel said to her,

"The Holy Spirit will come upon you, and the power of the Most High will overshadow you; therefore the child to be born will be called holy, the Son of God."
(Luke 1:26–35)

A more literal rendering of Mary's question would be: "How shall this be, since I do not know man?" "To know" is the common Hebrew idiom for sexual union. In the book of Genesis we read: "Cain knew his wife, and she conceived and bore Enoch. . . . Adam knew his wife again, and she bore a son and called his name Seth" (Genesis 4:17, 25). Still today we use the phrase "carnal knowledge" as a kind of polite phrase for sexual intercourse.

The connection between "knowing" and "conception" was clear in the Torah as it was in life. So what could Mary have meant by her question? The angel had told her she would conceive a son, and she did not understand how that could be. She had not carried out what she knew to be the requisite act for pregnancy.

It's not that Mary was ignorant of the facts of life. She genuinely wanted to know how the angel Gabriel's announcement could be true. Reading this passage, Saint Augustine
noted: "Surely she would not have said this unless she had already vowed herself to God as a virgin. . . . Certainly she would not have asked, how, being a female, she should give birth to her promised son, if she had married with the purpose of sexual intercourse."

According to Christian tradition, Mary remained perpetually a virgin—before Jesus's birth and after. Even before his conception, she may have discerned a special call to consecrated virginity. We have already seen that such commitments, though rare in Judaism, had ample precedent. Allow me to explain.

Celibacy may have been more common than modern scholars—and Christianity's ancient opponents, too—have been willing to acknowledge. Let's consider the sources.

First-century Judaism is an obscure and enigmatic subject of study. Our primary sources for knowledge of the period are the writings of Philo of Alexandria, a Jewish philosopher living in Egypt; the histories of Josephus (whom we've already encountered); the Dead Sea Scrolls, which were produced by a Jewish sect, or sects; and the documents of the New Testament.

Philo gives at least two examples of Jews observing celibacy. In his Apology for the Jews, he tells of a sect called the
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Essenes: “They banned marriage at the same time as they ordered the practice of perfect continence.” The Essenes seem, from all accounts, to have lived in Palestine, concentrating especially in the desert area near the Dead Sea. In his treatise *The Contemplative Life*, Philo describes another Jewish sect, called the Therapeuteae. Perhaps related to the Essenes, the Therapeuteae flourished in Egypt, and they also seem to have practiced celibacy and continence.

The historian Josephus discussed the Essenes at greater length and recorded that “they disdain marriage for themselves” and “they take no wives.”

Even Gentiles took notice of Essene celibacy. The Roman naturalist Pliny the Elder, writing in the first century, quipped that the desert dwellers lived without mates, “renouncing love altogether... having only the date palms for company.”

It is worth noting that several well-known Jewish figures of the first century observed celibacy: John the Baptist, Jesus, and Saint Paul. No one seems to have thought John odd for his renunciation of marriage—only for his diet of locusts and his clothing of camel hair. It is interesting, too, that Saint Paul devoted part of his First Letter to the Corinthians (chapter 7) to the subject of consecrated virginity and celibacy, and he assumed that there were already many people living that lifestyle in the Church. Jesus, who was celibate himself, did not treat celibacy as his own idiosyncrasy or prerogative but
rather assumed that others would follow the same path (see, for example, Matthew 19:10–12).

Mary’s virginal, divine motherhood was certainly a miraculous and unique event. But her virginity itself is not the far-fetched notion that some critics make it out to be. The tradition of consecrated virginity likely predated Christianity, though with Christianity it became commonplace. Wherever there were Christian churches, there were many women dedicated to perpetual virginity. The evidence is abundant from the first generation—the time of the Apostolic Fathers—onward. In every church, these consecrated women took as their model the poor girl from Nazareth.

Fundamentalist Protestants sometimes complain that Catholics exaggerate the role of the Blessed Virgin. But it is history itself—salvation history—that has given her an outsized role. It is the Lord of history who cast her for such a part in the drama.

Her lines in Saint Luke’s Gospel add up to far more than a cameo appearance. The story of redemption turns on her brief dialogue with the angel. Heaven awaits her response. The Church has ever since echoed her prayer, the Magnificat.