

HOMILY Atlanta, 2008

I. Introduction

As we gather to reflect on what it means for the Church to sing the praise of her Lord in the Sacred Liturgy, how wonderful that we begin with a Mass in honor of the Blessed Virgin Mary! We begin by honoring her whose anthem concludes every liturgical day, and on this morning of Mary's day, we begin to sing with her of whom Saint Augustine spoke so many years ago:

“Hear, then,” he once proclaimed, “how sweetly she sings, she who leads our chorus. She who proclaims, :”My soul magnifies the Lord, my spirit rejoices in God my Savior. For he has looked on my lowliness and henceforth all generations will call be blessed.” Through her song a miraculous new birth takes away the cause of our increasing burden of sin, and Mary's song puts an end to the weeping of Eve.”¹

For, as the introduction to the Mass texts we sing this morning tells us, Mary provides the perfect example of a singer of the Sacred Liturgy, she who in her lowliness “prompts the faithful to celebrate the mysteries of Christ with that same spirit of reverent devotion with which she took part in the birth of her son, in his epiphanies, and in his death and resurrection. In particular, Mary's example urges the faithful to treasure the word of God in their hearts...to praise God exultantly...to offer themselves generously...to pray with perseverance...to act in all things with mercy and humility...to cherish the law of God and embrace it with love...to love God in everything and above everything else; to be ready to meet Christ when he comes.”²

And so this morning I would like to reflect briefly on three lessons we learn from Mary, which apply equally well to singing at the sacred liturgy.

Worship requires humility

Whenever we meditate on the mysteries of the Mother of God we are faced with two women, as different as night and day: Eve and Mary. One represents original

¹ Saint Augustine

²*Collection of Masses of the Blessed Virgin Mary*, number 17.

darkness and sin, while the other is original sinlessness and grace. One is old, while the other is new. One takes, while the other gives. One is entrapped by a web of lies, while the other breaks free with a courage born of her womb. One breaks God's command, while the other embraces his Word.

What is it that makes Eve and Mary so different? Fundamentally the difference lies in their relationship to God. Eve chose her own way, while Mary chose God's way.

**Mary said, "Behold, I am the handmaid of the Lord.
May it be done to me according to your word."**

If, then, our sung praise is to be like Eve's, it will be very impressed with itself. The subject of our song will be **our** accomplishments, **our** success and our hopes and dreams. Our sung praise will be self-sufficient, narcissistic and ever so ingenious.

If, however, our sung praise is to be like Mary's, it will be obedient to God's will, self-emptying and self-effacing. It will draw us beyond ourselves and unite us to Jesus, so that what we sing is his glory, not ours...his will, not ours...him, not me. With Mary, we will sing the mighty power of God.

The Fathers of the Second Vatican Council said it best when they proclaimed that:

In the earthly liturgy we take part in a foretaste of that heavenly liturgy which is celebrated in the holy city of Jerusalem toward which we journey as pilgrims, where Christ is sitting at the right hand of God, a minister of the holies and of the true tabernacle; **we sing a hymn to the Lord's glory with all the warriors of the heavenly army**; venerating the memory of the saints, we hope for some part and fellowship with them; we eagerly await the Savior, Our Lord Jesus Christ, until He, our life, shall appear and we

too will appear with Him in glory.³

Christ Jesus, then, is the cause and the end of song, the reason and the rhyme. For Mary, the song is always about him and never about me.

II. Worship is an action of Christ

Mary teaches us that the Song of the Sacred Liturgy is not really our song. It is the song of Christ, to which we are unworthily joined.

I love annunciation themes. They are among the most deeply moving in all of Christian iconography. I think particularly of the Van Eyck Annunciation at the National Gallery in Washington D.C.. In it a gorgeously attired Gabriel who hails the Virgin with the words *Ave Gratia Plena*. Mary responds with *Ecce ancilla Domini* as the Holy Spirit descends in the form of a dove whose path from heaven is marked by gold threads. It is a wonderful depiction of grace in beauty.

At the same time, the central character of the annunciation story is nowhere to be seen in Van Eyck's masterpiece! Listen again to a portion of Saint Luke's account of the annunciation and tell me who the main character is:

Behold, you will conceive in your womb and bear a son,
and you shall name him Jesus.
He will be great and will be called Son of the Most High,
and the Lord God will give him the throne of David his father,
and he will rule over the house of Jacob forever,
and of his kingdom there will be no end.

The center of this narrative is Christ, hidden in the womb of the virgin: he who is the center of life itself and the climax of human history. He is promised from the beginning through Eve and foretold through Elizabeth. He is incarnate in Mary and triumphant in his Church at the end of time. Our liturgy is to follow him and be ready to meet him as he turns round to greet us. But how is this to be done?

It is simply by joining ourselves to his perfect sacrifice of praise upon the cross. Just as on Calvary Mary clung to that wood, the altar upon which was offered the paschal sacrifice, so participation in the Sacred Liturgy consists in joining our

³S.C. 8

hearts and our voices to the song of obedient praise by which Christ has redeemed the world. Such song changes us: it draws us so deeply into mysteries we celebrate that we are transformed into the image of him whose body and blood we eat and drink.

Full participation in such a sacred song, means a full donation of myself. A conscious participation in such a mystery means an intentional dying to my own will and a rebirth to God's will for me. Active participation in such mysteries means that I actively let go of everything I have and embrace with all my heart and soul and mind and voice the obedient and active love of Christ who now lives in me.

What is the most important element in good liturgical song, then? It is the realization that it is Christ who sings, and we, in the words of Saint Ignatius of Antioch, must be:

like the string of a lyre, each in harmony with the bishops. Hence it is that in the harmony of your minds and hearts Jesus Christ is hymned. Make of yourselves a choir, so that with one voice and one mind, taking the key-note of God, you may sing in unison with one voice through Jesus Christ to the Father, and He may hear you and recognize you...as members of his Son.

III. Mary Leads the Song

It is the Blessed Virgin Mary, then, who provides the real keynote to this day of study, for by her life she leads us to an authentic celebration of the Sacred Liturgy.

How appropriate it is to recall this morning that, from the earliest days of the Church, she has been seen as the morning star, the first light which heralds the coming of the Sun, the light that never fades.

So, as Saint Bernard once reminded us, this morning star is the chorus master of a "great multitude" (Rev 19:6) beginning to swell. Hear, if you will, the voice of those who look to this morning star, and follow her to the marriage supper of the Lamb. In them, a new song lifts the heart of the Church that is alive and young."⁴

⁴ Saint Bernard

In us, today, may a new song lift up the heart of the Church, that we might join our poor and dissonant voices to the glorious sacrifice of praise sung eternally from the wood of Cross. Give us a share in your littleness, your obedience and your love, O Blessed Virgin Mary, that we may be worthy of the song!