

Mary

and Catholic Leadership in Schools

I have been invited to share some reflections on Mary and leadership in Catholic schools. Since we are in Advent, I have chosen to focus on three moments in Mary's life that connect with the childhood of Christ and his coming into the world, and to propose three virtues of Catholic leadership that arise from considering these events. Much of what I say comes out of my own experience in pastoral ministry; some of it comes from my work helping others prepare for ministry in the Church.



The Annunciation of Mary

The Annunciation

The people of first century Palestine are a people bereft of hope. It is many centuries since the end of the exile in Babylon, but they are still not truly free. Since the return of Israel to the land of their ancestors, the people have had to suffer one invasion after another. Under the Roman occupation, though the Temple has been rebuilt, division, violence and injustice continue to plague Israel.

To a first century Jew living in Palestine, all of this is evidence that Israel is still in exile. The Chosen People are not fulfilling their vocation to be a light to the nations, to be the place from which justice, reconciliation and peace flow out to all peoples. There is a tremendous yearning for God to overturn the power of violence and death represented by Rome, and thus restore Israel. For some, like the Pharisees, what is required to bring about the restoration of Israel is an effort to become a just and peaceful nation by following the Law perfectly so that God will reward its efforts by acting to rescue Israel. For others, like the Zealots, Israel must take its destiny into its own hands and violently overthrow the Roman occupier, forcing God to give victory. For yet others, like the Sadducees, Israel must wait and compromise with Rome in order to survive long enough for God to act. Finally, for people like the Essenes, the only solution is to retire into the desert to found a pure Israel separated from the world.

This is the Jewish world of Mary, the reality in which she lives. What is it like for her to hear the words of the angel, that her Son is the promised Messiah, the agent of God's Reign? We have tended often to notice only the joy of the occasion, and joyful news it is. But Mary understands that her life is about to change significantly, that her "yes" to God's call means "yes" to allowing her life to be marked by the inevitable public conflicts that will accompany her Son's vocation. As he will proclaim the Reign of God in his own radical way, he will challenge the solutions of the Pharisees, the Zealots, the Sadducees and the Essenes alike, calling them

to abandon their agendas to trust him in his. This vocation, as we know, will be violently rejected. Mary also will hear from Simeon in the Temple, “and a sword will pierce your heart too.”

Accepting a public vocation in society and the Church, saying yes to the call to Catholic leadership, is a good and wonderful thing. We experience the affirmation of people’s recognition of our skills and talents. But our lives, like Mary’s, will be touched by the inevitable public conflicts that arise from competing visions of Catholic education, the pressures of budgetary constraints and cutbacks, and the pressures of the public politics of Catholic education. Often it is precisely in these conflicts that we feel most powerless. How can I face these pressures without burning out? How can I resist better the impulse to react with anger when a parent criticizes me or my school or teachers for something that is beyond our control? How can I let go of the violence that is being done to us in the media, or by people who have only finances and bottom lines on their mind?

What is Mary’s response to the angel’s call? “I am the handmaid of the Lord, let what you have said be done to me.” This is not the passive assent of one who is resigned to her fate. This is the

expression of a profound trust in God. She acknowledges with the angel, “nothing is impossible to God.” And she places her trust in God alone.

Such trust is not easily achieved. Catholic artists representing the Annunciation have long intuited this: Mary is almost always presented as being at prayer, with God’s Word open before her. To place our trust in God in this way; to have the freedom to find our strength in God alone and forego anger, violence and defensiveness; to be a person of peace in situations where genuinely Catholic leadership requires us to act not only for justice for our students but also for peace and reconciliation with others. This is only possible if we have developed a life of peace-filled prayer that brings us into communion with God. This is much simpler than we think. It can be as simple as having a daily cup of tea or coffee with God, in the quiet of the early day or late evening, aware of God’s love. It is often helpful to listen to Scripture in these times. It is not complicated. The most difficult thing is to believe that it is worth setting aside some time out of every busy day, to learn to taste God’s very real love for us, and to deepen our trust in God so that we regularly turn our will and our lives over to God’s care, especially in situations of conflict.



Mary Visits Elizabeth

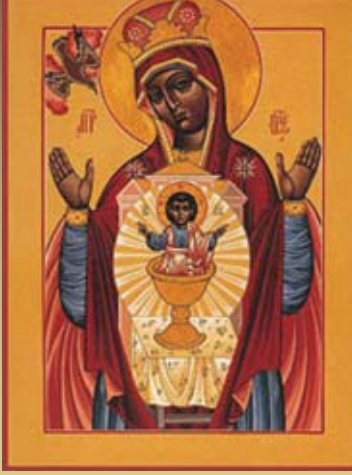
The Visitation

Mary sets out to visit Elizabeth, the one woman who can understand “from the inside” the greatness of what God has done. She is the one person who can also understand the challenges ahead. As they greet each other, both erupt into praise of God and God’s great deeds. Mary in particular is drawn to sing the prophetic words of the song we have come to know by its first word in Latin, the Magnificat: “My soul proclaims the greatness of the Lord.”

I have two very vivid memories of the Magnificat. In 1997, I was ordained on the feast of the Visitation. I chose as my prayer card an icon of Our Lady entitled, *Your Lap has Become the Holy Table*. The icon shows Mary seated, with a table on her knees and the Christ child emerging from a chalice on the table. Behind him, in front of Mary’s torso, is an image of the front of a Church building. This icon is, for me, a powerful image of the mission of the whole Church to proclaim the presence of Christ and be an instrument of his ministry of forgiveness, communion and justice. Mary is the prophet who understands God’s labours in the world and preaches Good News.

In 2007 I was given the great privilege to spend three months in Togo, a small country in West Africa. I spent my time accompanying people living with HIV and AIDS, of which many in Africa are young women. People living with HIV are often shunned by others, who see them as sources of shame for family and community. Many of these women, however, were also our parishioners, and every Sunday they would participate enthusiastically in the mass. Such joy in the midst of illness and marginalization impressed me deeply. On a particular occasion, I happened to take up the text of the Visitation in Luke as my prayer text for the day. As I contemplated Mary and Elizabeth in the story, their faces morphed into those of the women I had been accompanying, and they broke out in joyful ululations, as many of our parishioners do in their joy. It was a powerful moment of insight, a true gift from God: Mary proclaims her prophetic song because it is born out of deep joy even in the face of struggle.

Catholic leaders are also called to be prophetic; they are called to foster the growth of genuine community around them, in their schools and in the communities where their schools reside. Like Mary, such prophecy is an authentic bringing of the Word only if it is born of joy, joy in our hearts and joy in our communities. Prophecy is not angry but joyful, and it is part of our mission as Catholic leaders to foster joy in community.



herself before these mysteries in her life that she develops the freedom and the courage that will allow her to stand before the Cross much later.

Catholic leadership must be grounded in a reflective and ever deepening self-knowledge, a humble acknowledgement of my limitations and my need for God's gifts, of my desire to serve and of what prevents me from genuinely loving my neighbour. Over time, I am called to let go of prejudices, to admit my lack of understanding and ask for wisdom. The more I know myself truthfully before God, the

more I ponder these things in my heart, the greater will be my freedom and courage to support my staff, to bring the best out of my students, to stand up and speak truth in situations of conflict. Self-awareness and self-reflection are also very simple to cultivate, and can be part of the daily routine of prayer and thanksgiving.

The Finding in the Temple

Mary and Joseph must have been beside themselves with worry. What a blow it must have been to hear Jesus say to them, as if nothing were wrong, "Why were you looking for me? Did you not know that I must be busy with my Father's work?" Such a remark, even from a twelve-year-old, cuts to the heart. But Mary does not respond with further words of reproof. Though she did not understand, the Gospel of Luke tells us that she "pondered all these things in her heart."

The heart, in biblical language, is the seat of reflection, the place where I stand before God in all truth. God knows the heart of every person. Mary reflects on herself in light of these events, observes her own confusion and desire to understand, her own limitations and her profound love for her Son. It is from this reflection on

Three Virtues of a Genuine Catholic Leadership

Mary leads us in these three moments of her life to acknowledge three basic virtues of Catholic leadership: trust in God, prophetic joy and growing self-awareness. Developing these virtues takes time, and giving ourselves this time in the midst of busy personal and professional lives can seem impossible. But it remains true that setting aside even the smallest portion of our time to cultivate these attitudes in prayer and reflection yields fruit a hundredfold. What better time than Advent, when we recall the longing of Israel and our own longing for God's Reign, to begin to foster these virtues in ourselves?

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Merry Christmas

*During this Christmas season,
May Jesus' love and presence fill you
to overflowing, as you share in the
warmth of home, love of family and
warmth of friends.*

*Wishing you and your family a most
holy Christmas and a blessed New Year.*

The Catholic Principals' Council of Ontario



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