

Mary's Magnificat: A Model of Thanksgiving for Christians

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Introduction

Good morning and welcome to our Day of Prayer. I wish to thank the Adult Faith Formation of St. Michael's Church for organizing this retreat. I am deeply grateful to God for this opportunity to spend this day of prayer with you. I thank you for taking time to be at this retreat. I thank God for bringing us together today to reflect on the Blessed Virgin Mary. We know full well the indispensable place of Mary in our salvation history as Christians and Catholics. Mary is our Mother and she always intercedes for us.

This paper first describes the meaning of 'Magnificat.' It then examines the Song of Hannah in the First Book of Samuel as a prototype of Mary's Magnificat. It also highlights the different parts of the Magnificat and underscores Mary as a model of thanksgiving for all Christians. The paper concludes by calling on all Christians to constantly give thanks to God in imitation of the Blessed Virgin Mary.

What is Magnificat?

The word 'Magnificat' means to magnify, to extol; it means to sing the praises of God. The Magnificat in Luke's gospel is Mary's song of praise to God. Mary acknowledges all that God has done in her life. Mary feels favored, blessed, honored, and raised by God that she is moved to sing the praises of God. Mary is so overwhelmed by God's love and grace that she responds with this amazing song of praise to God.

The Song of Hannah (1 Samuel 2:1-10)

Hannah was the mother of Samuel. The Song of Hannah is a prototype of the Magnificat. *The Oxford Encyclopedic English Dictionary* defines a prototype as "an original thing or person of which or whom copies, imitations, improved forms, representations, etc are made." The Magnificat of Mary can be described as the improved form of the Song of Hannah.

As we read in the First Book of Samuel (1 Sam 1:1-28) Elkanah had two wives: Hannah and Peninnah. Peninnah had children but Hannah did not have children. Peninnah constantly taunted Hannah for her barrenness. This prompted Hannah to pray to God with tears and tremendous grief when Elkanah and his family went on pilgrimage to Shiloh to offer sacrifice. Hannah prayed fervently to God for a child. She made a vow to offer up the child to God for the rest of his life and no razor would touch his head. God eventually answered Hannah's prayer by granting him a son named Samuel, whom she dedicated to God as a minister in the sanctuary at Shiloh, as she had promised.

In the Song of Hannah, Hannah glorified God for vindicating her and wiping tears from her eyes with the birth of her son Samuel. The Song of Hannah underlines the theology of the poor of Yahweh known as *anawim*. The poor of Yahweh depended totally on God for their sustenance and deliverance. They had no one else to go to for help except Yahweh.

The opening stanza of Hannah's song prefigures the Magnificat of Mary. Hannah said:

“My heart exults in Yahweh,
in my God is my strength lifted up,
my mouth derides my foes
for I rejoice in your deliverance” (1 Samuel 2:1).

Hannah also said in her song:

“Yahweh gives death and life
brings down to Sheol and draws up;
Yahweh makes poor and rich,
he humbles and also exalts” (1 Samuel 2:6-7)

“He raises the poor from the dust,
he lifts the needy from the dunghill
to give them a place with princes,
to assign them a seat of honor;” (1 Samuel 2:8)

We see quite clearly how Hannah's song is a prototype of the Magnificat. However, the Magnificat is a more personal praise of God by Mary for the wonders and marvels God did in her life. Hannah represents all poor people who have endured humiliation but at the end vindicated by God.

Mary's Magnificat (Luke 1:46-56)

Mary's Magnificat is an outburst of praise and gratitude to God. This song of Mary was precipitated by the inspired declaration of the blessedness of Mary by her elder cousin Elizabeth. Mary visited Elizabeth in order to help her out. This is what Mary does best, helping those in need. Filled with the Holy Spirit, Elizabeth exclaimed in a loud voice: “Most blessed are you among women, and blessed is the fruit of your womb. And how does this happen to me, that the mother of my Lord should come to me” (Lk 1:42-43). Mary's response to the inspired utterance of Elizabeth was this magnificent song of praise known as the Magnificat.

It is pertinent at this juncture to examine the different parts of Mary's Magnificat.

“My soul proclaims the greatness of the Lord and my spirit rejoices in God my Savior” (Lk 1:46-47)

Mary rejoices in God because of God's miraculous action of enabling her to become pregnant by the power of the Holy Spirit. Mary recognizes God's salvation in her pregnancy of the Savior of the world. Mary is filled with joy and acknowledges the almighty power of God. This shows very clearly that with God all things are possible (Mt 19:26) and nothing is impossible to God (Lk 1:37). Mary recognizes God as not only her Savior but the Savior of the nation of Israel.

“For he has looked upon his handmaid’s lowliness. Yes, from now onwards all generations will call me blessed” (Lk 1:48)

Mary says, ‘from now onwards.’ This is an imperative. This is a decisive and turning point in human history. As I noted in my book *Understanding and Praying the Holy Rosary*, pp 20-21:

- “Mary knows that she is blessed and favored by God. She rejoices and gives thanks to God. She understands the importance of her place in the history of salvation. She remains grateful to God for elevating her to this dignified position as the mother of the Redeemer. She also foretells that because of God’s abundant blessing and goodness to her, it is imperative that henceforth all generations will recognize her and call her blessed.”

True to Mary’s prediction, Elizabeth had already recognized Mary’s blessedness. Elizabeth cried out as she received Mary into her home, “Of all women you are the most blessed, and blessed is the fruit of your womb. Why should I be honored with a visit from the mother of my Lord” (Luke 1:42-43). Mary is blessed because of her pre-eminent role in salvation history. Mary is the mother of the Savior of the world. Elizabeth acknowledged Mary’s blessedness because she is the mother of the Lord. In fact, the angel Gabriel was the first to acknowledge that Mary is blessed. The angel Gabriel addressed Mary as the one highly favored by God, full of grace (Lk 1:27).

“For the Almighty has done great things for me, Holy is his name” (Lk 1:49)

Mary realizes her humble background; she recognizes her lowliness and feels eternally grateful to God for looking upon her with favor despite her lowliness. This confirms the Song of Hannah which shows God as the God who comes to the aid of the poor of Yahweh. ‘Great things’ is an Old Testament stereotype for God’s saving intervention in Israel’s history; for example, the exodus. Having acknowledged what God has done for her, Mary extols God saying ‘Holy is his name.’ It is in the nature of God to be holy and thus God’s name is also holy. In fact, the holiness of God’s name is so acknowledged by orthodox Jews that they would not even mention the name of God. Essentially, Mary acknowledges the holiness of God. Holiness, first and foremost, belongs to God. God is holy and it is in God’s nature to be holy. Holiness is fundamental to God’s nature: “God as God is holy by definition” (*Dictionary of Christian Spirituality*, p. 487). The concept of the “holy” pertains to that which is ultimate, that is, God and the Sacred. Mary magnificently recognizes the awesome holiness of God.

**“He has used the power of his arm,
he has routed the arrogant of heart.
He has pulled down princes from their thrones and raised high the lowly.
He has filled the starving with good things, sent the rich away empty” (Lk 1:51-53)**

This part of the Magnificat reflects and mirrors Hannah’s song of praise. This part of the Magnificat is quite revolutionary like the Song of Hannah. It also shows the paradox of the

Christian life. As the Lord Jesus tells us: “for everyone who exalts himself will be humbled, and the one who humbles himself will be exalted” (Luke 18:14). The Christian should never be a proud person; one cannot be a true follower of Christ and yet remain proud. One cannot be boastful either. Scripture tells us “Let anyone who wants to boast, boast in the Lord” (1 Cor 1:31; 2 Cor 10:17).

Proud people are confident in themselves and have no place for God in their lives; they trust in their own abilities and achievements; they exalt in themselves and look down on others. But the salvation of God in Jesus Christ brings reversal in the sense that the proud are scattered and become confused; they are routed. There is a tendency for the rich and powerful people in society like kings, princes, rulers, etc., to become proud persons. Mary’s revolutionary Magnificat tells us of how God humbles the proud and dethrones those in high and exalted places who have become boastful, arrogant, and self-centered. We have seen this repeatedly in society that the so-called *high and mighty* eventually meet their *waterloo* if they refuse to change from their arrogant way of life.

The reversal of fortune is further expressed by way of economic revolution as the hungry are filled with good things while the rich are sent empty away. Jesus would later teach of this reversal in the beatitudes.

**“He has come to the help of Israel his servant, mindful of his faithful love
according to the promise he made to our ancestors
of his mercy to Abraham and to his descendants for ever” (Lk 1:54-55)**

The last part of the Magnificat focuses on Israel. It acknowledges God’s help to Israel and God remembering his mercy to Israel. The Jewish people always asked God in their prayers to remember Israel and the promises of God’s mercy made to Israel through Abraham, and his descendants forever. For the individual Jewish person, to be remembered by God means to be alive while to be forgotten by God means to die. Hence in their prayers they asked God to remember them.

Mary as a model of thanksgiving

Mary is a model of thanksgiving as manifested in her Magnificat. Mary rejoices and extols God for what God has done in her life. She thanks God for what God has done to the world through her Son Jesus Christ. She acknowledges God’s graciousness, “the Almighty has done great things for me. Holy is his name” (Lk 1:49). Mary sings the praise of God. She is humbled and in awe at what God has done for such a lowly handmaid. Mary is an example of what it means to constantly thank God. It did not mean that Mary’s life was smooth and without trials. But in the *Magnificat*, she expresses her thanksgiving to God for God’s marvels in her and in the poor. We too like Mary should continually express our gratitude to God for what God has done in our lives.

It is pertinent to ask ourselves: What has God done in my life that I should praise God? Do I have any reason in my life to thank God? Do I recognize what God has done for me? Mary has shown us what it means to live a life of constant thanksgiving to God. Let us

imitate our Blessed Mother and ask her to intercede for us so that we too can see God's goodness in our lives and give thanks to God for it.

Mary's Magnificat is the Magnificat of the Church and its members. The Magnificat is sung every day in the Evening Prayer of the Divine Office. It is also recited every day by members of the Legion of Mary in their prayer.

Conclusion

My beloved brothers and sisters, let us always strive as Christians to cultivate a spirit of gratitude and thanksgiving to God. The Bible is filled with the exhortation to give thanks to God. It is true that we might not have always received what we asked from God; it is true that we might have felt abandoned by God at one time or another in our lives; it is true that we might have been afflicted by pain and suffering; it is true we might have struggled with ill health; it is true we might have been bereaved; it is true we might have experienced injustice, etc. Despite all these, our faith as Christians calls us to always give thanks to God. In spite of the trials and problems we face, we should turn to God and reaffirm our faith in God like Job who says, "For I know that my redeemer lives" (Job 19:25). I know a woman whose vocation was to lead people on pilgrimage to the Holy Land. Her motto is: GIVE THANKS AND REMEMBER. For our part, let us not forget to GIVE THANKS TO GOD AND REMEMBER WHAT GOD HAS DONE FOR US.

I would like to conclude with the words of St. Paul from the scripture: "Rejoice always; pray without ceasing, give thanks in all circumstances; for this is the will of God in Christ Jesus for you" (1 Thessalonians 5:16-18).

May the Blessed Virgin Mary intercede for all of us both now and forever! Amen.

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