

# FOR THE GREAT FEAST OF MARY, THE HOLY MOTHER OF GOD, AN EXCELLENT ARTICLE BY THE WISE IRISH PRIEST DONAL DORR

Donal Dorr

## Mary's Prayer



Those of us who regularly pray the Evening Prayer of the Divine Office find ourselves repeating that lovely prayer of Mary, the pregnant mother of Jesus, which St Luke has in the first chapter of his Gospel (Luke 1:46-55). Even those of us who don't know Latin have got used to calling this prayer *The Magnificat*. That is the first word of the Latin text of the prayer; and the best translation of that line is 'My soul proclaims the glory of God'. It comes as Mary's response to the greetings and praise of her cousin Elizabeth.

In St Luke's gospel, the meeting between Mary and Elizabeth takes place several months before Jesus was born. Now the Scripture scholars tell us that Luke's gospel was written about thirty years after the death of Jesus. So the written version only came about sixty years after the event it describes. Some of the scholars suggest that the dialogue between Mary and Elizabeth as written in the gospel may not be an exact historical account of what actually happened.

However, I think it would be a mistake for us to get caught up in an argument about to what extent Luke embellished a story which had previously been handed on only by word of mouth. We cannot be sure how much the newly pregnant Mary knew beforehand about the part she would play in how Jesus would live out his life and the details of his death and resurrection. But we can be sure that God did not use Mary as just a blind instrument in the great work of Redemption.

The gospel assures us that Mary was a woman who reflected deep in her heart about how God's plan was being put into effect in all that was happening to her and her son (Luke 2:51). So I like to think that, already even before Jesus was born, this young woman had a sense or inkling that her child would fulfil the ancient prophecies of her people and be the key turning point of the history of humanity and even of the whole of creation.

Perhaps it was only in her old age that she could look back over the life of Jesus and her own life and fully understand 'the great things' that God would do through her child and her own role in it. Maybe it was only at that stage that she could put words on the story and perhaps whisper it to some of the followers of Jesus, including St Luke.

### THE DIALOGUE

In the story Elizabeth focuses attention on how blessed Mary and her child are, and on the faith of Mary. Mary responds by praising and rejoicing in God for 'the great things' that God has done for her. But very quickly she moves on from speaking of her own personal experience; her main interest is in situating her pregnancy within a far wider context.

Borrowing words and whole passages from the Jewish scriptures on which she has been nourished, she recalls the long history of how, from the time of Moses onwards, God has been with her people, especially the poor, in their struggle for liberation from powerful and arrogant oppressors. She says:

*'The All-powerful One has stretched out a mighty arm, to foil the plans of the arrogant, to pull down mighty rulers from their seats of power, and lift up the little people.*

*God has filled the hungry with the best of food while the rich are sent away empty.'*

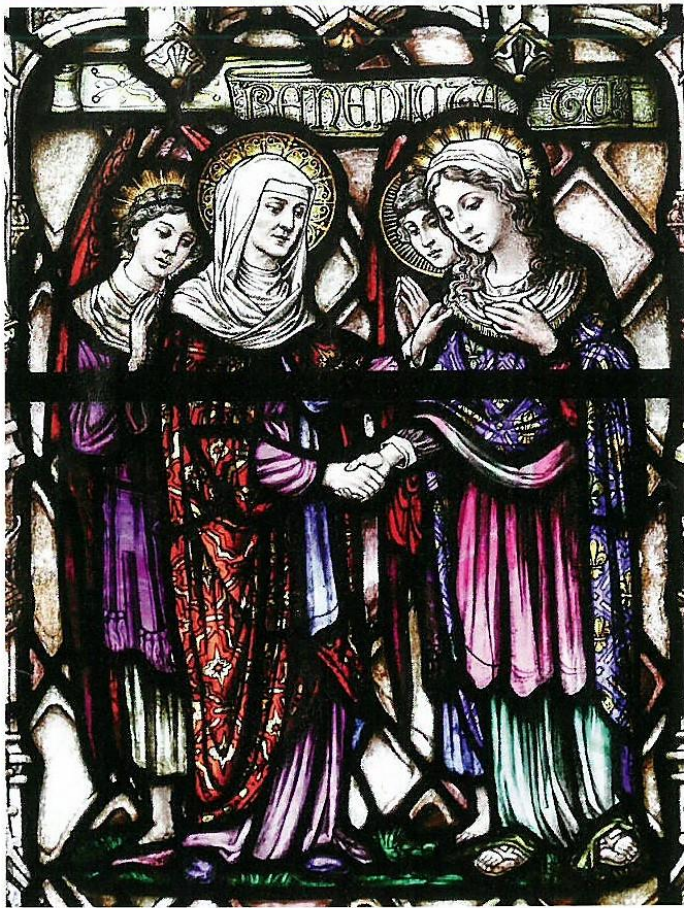
So Mary locates the coming of her child as a key point in this long history of salvation. Towards the end of this beautiful prayer, Mary looks back even further – back to God's promise to Abraham and Sarah:

*'God is the One who in the past came to the help of the people of Israel, God's people, fulfilling the promise made to those who went before us, a promise of mercy made by God to Abraham and Sarah and their children's children down through the ages.'*

### HOW ALL THIS RELATES TO US

Most women who become pregnant for the first time with a longed-for child share the kind of feelings of joy and gratitude experienced by Mary. And in such situations the father is also filled with delight and hope and thanksgiving. It is fortunate, then, that they can borrow the beautiful words of Mary to give





The Visitation window in the Mercy Sisters Convent chapel in Albany, NY, USA. (Photo: L. Lew OP)

## The Magnificat

My soul proclaims the greatness of the Lord,  
and my spirit rejoices in God my Saviour;  
since he has looked with favour on the lowliness of his  
servant.

For see, from now on all generations will call me blessed,  
for the Almighty has done great things for me,  
and holy is his name,

and his mercy is from generation to generation on those  
who fear him.

He has exerted the power of his arm,  
he has scattered the proud in the thoughts of their heart.  
He has taken down princes from thrones, and raised up  
the lowly.

He has filled the hungry with good things, and sent the  
rich away empty.

He has come to the help of Israel his servant,  
in remembrance of his mercy,  
according to the promise he made to our ancestors,  
of his mercy to Abraham  
and his descendants for ever.

Luke 1: 46-55

*Revised New Jerusalem Bible, New Testament and Psalms, with study  
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expression to the prayers of gratitude and joy that arise spontaneously in their hearts. Each of them can say with Mary how blessed they feel.

No doubt their main focus at this privileged time is on themselves and their unborn child. But they will find it helpful at times to follow the example of Mary in widening their vision. They will think about the kind of home into which they want their child to be born – and how they can help to create a community that will enable their child to be safe and to flourish. They may go on to reflect on how important it is that they play their part in ensuring that climate change and the loss of so many species of animals and plants do not make this world an unliveable place for their child.

Perhaps too they can, like Mary, broaden their vision even further, looking back and looking forward. As they look back, they may come to appreciate the many ways in which their own parents and grandparents cared for them as children and may even now be generously supporting them and surrounding them with love.

They may also become more aware of the rich religious culture and tradition which they have inherited. While not playing down the distortions and inadequacies of the institutional Church, and the abuses which have caused so much outrage and suffering, they may appreciate the good aspects of that heritage. They may feel called to commit themselves to ensuring that

their soon-to-be-born child will be nurtured in a spiritual tradition which will give meaning and hope to the life of their child.

### THE PLAN OF A LOVING GOD

In those final lines of her prayer, Mary recalls God's promise made centuries earlier – a promise that the divine mercy would reach down through all the succeeding generations. Mary's child, Jesus the Saviour, came as the fulfilment of that promise. The whole history of the Jewish people had been leading up to the birth of Jesus. It was all part of the playing out of God's loving plan.

God's plan for humanity and all of creation centres on the birth of Jesus. But it includes also the pregnancy of every mother who, with her partner, has hoped and prayed for a child. So each newly pregnant mother can experience herself and her partner as chosen by God, like Mary, to play a privileged role in the loving divine plan. And the life-story of Mary's child Jesus shows us that if we wish to play our part in God's plan we must show special care for those who have been left on the margins of society, and work to care for this fragile world into which this new child will be born. ■

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