

A story is told of a little six-year-old Protestant boy who had often heard his Catholic companion reciting the prayer 'Hail Mary.' He liked it so much that he copied it, memorized it and would recite it every day. 'Look, Mummy, what a beautiful prayer,' he said to his mother one day. 'Never again say it,' answered the mother. 'It is a superstitious prayer of Catholics who adore idols and think Mary a goddess. After all, she is a woman like any other. Come on, take this Bible and read it. It contains everything that we are bound to do and have to do.'

From that day on the little boy discontinued his daily 'Hail Mary' and gave himself more time to reading the Bible instead. One day, while reading the Gospel, he came across the passage about the Annunciation of the Angel to Our Lady. Full of joy, the little boy ran to his mother and said: 'Mummy, I have found the 'Hail Mary' in the Bible which says: 'Hail Mary full of grace, the Lord is with thee, blessed art thou amongst women. ' Why do you call it a superstitious prayer?'

On another occasion he found that beautiful Salutation of St. Elizabeth to The Virgin Mary and the wonderful canticle, the "Magnificat," in which Mary foretold that 'the generations would call her blessed.' He said no more about it to his mother but started to recite the 'Hail Mary' every day as before. He felt pleasure in addressing those charming words to the Mother of Jesus, our Savior.

When he was fourteen, he one day heard a discussion on Our Lady among the members of his family. Every one said that Mary was a common woman like any other woman. The boy, after listening to their erroneous reasoning, could not bear it any longer, and full of indignation, he interrupted them, saying: 'Mary is not like any other children of Adam, stained with sin. No! The Angel called her FULL OF GRACE AND BLESSED AMONGST WOMEN. Mary is the Mother of Jesus Christ and consequently Mother of God. There is no higher dignity to which a creature can be raised. The Gospel says that the generations will proclaim her blessed and you are trying to despise her and look down on her. Your spirit is not the Spirit Of the Gospel or of the Bible which you proclaim to be the foundation of the Christian religion.' So deep was the impression which the boy's talk had made that his mother many times cried out sorrowfully: 'Oh my God! I fear that this son of mine will one day join the Catholic religion, the religion of Popes!' And indeed, not very long afterwards, having made a serious study of both Protestantism and Catholicism, the boy found the latter to be the only true religion and embraced it and became one of its most ardent apostles.

Some time after his conversion, he met his married sister who rebuked him and said indignantly: 'You little know how much I love my children. Should any one of them desire to become a Catholic, I would sooner pierce his heart with a dagger than allow him to embrace the religion of the Popes!' Her anger and temper were as furious as those of St. Paul before his conversion. However, she would change her ways, just as St. Paul did on his way to Damascus.

It so happened that one of her sons fell dangerously ill and the doctors gave up hope of recovery. Her brother then approached, her and spoke to her affectionately, saying: 'My dear sister, you naturally wish to have your child cured. Very well, then, do what I ask

you to do. Follow me, let us pray one 'Hail Mary' and promise God that, if your son recovers his health, you would seriously study the Catholic doctrine, and should you come to the conclusion that Catholicism is the only true religion, you would embrace it no matter what the sacrifices may be.'

His sister was somewhat reluctant at the beginning but as she wished for her son's recovery. She accepted her brother's proposal and recited the 'Hail Mary' together with him. The next day her son was completely cured! The mother fulfilled her promise and she studied the Catholic doctrine. After long preparation she received Baptism together with her family, thanking her brother for being an apostle to her.

The story was related during a sermon given by the priest, Rev. Father Tuckwell. 'Brethren, he went on and said, 'The boy who became a Catholic and converted his sister to Catholicism dedicated his whole life to the service of God. He is the priest who is speaking to you now!

Growing up, I was fortunate in that I had a family who was always very supportive. But we live more and more in a secular world, and often people who have faith can be misunderstood. And one of the biggest aspects of our faith that is misunderstood is Mary. Mary is not a goddess or the fourth member of the Trinity, but she is such an important part of our Catholic faith. This feast gives us the chance to reflect on her role.

On the one end, some Protestants accuse Catholics of worshipping Mary as if she is equal to God, and contend as Fr. Tuckwell's family did that she is just an ordinary woman like the rest of us. On the other extreme, there are some who may look at her as being equal to Jesus or the Trinity, or, even if well-intended, put much more emphasis on a Marian apparition or private revelation (a message from Mary given to an individual) then they do about learning the faith as revealed in Scripture and Tradition, almost deifying her. The truth with respect to Mary and our understanding of her is that she is an intercessor, someone we hold in very high regard because she is always close to her son.

And that is what this feast is about: honoring Mary as our Mother, and our intercessor.

Very often, a quiet word from a mother can have a remarkable impact on their child. It can produce a big change in behavior when all manner of alternatives have failed. And it can turn lukewarm interest or indifference on the part of the child into something approaching enthusiasm. Indeed, it's not unknown for some to approach a son's mother in order to get her to persuade the son to do something for them. But if that is the case for even the most stubborn son, how much more effective will a mother's word be in the case of a perfect son?

That is what we see in the relationship between Jesus and Mary. Christ is the perfect son, and Mary is his mother. And we expect Mary would have a big influence on her son, which is what we think about on this feast of the Solemnity of Mary, Mother of God.

Christ is fully divine, but also fully human, and he is no less a human than we are. Mary gives birth to a human, but Jesus as God existed in eternity; in the Incarnation, Christ became a human. But again, He is also fully divine. That being the case, if Jesus is God, it would seem that there would be knowledge of the future and what will be will be.

But if that's the case, what role is left for Mary to influence Christ her son? Not much it seems. It would seem what will happen will happen. Thankfully that is not the end of the story. In his providence God does bring some things about through our intercession. It's not that he leaves a gap in his providence for us to have our chance so to speak. Rather we come to desire what God wants in particular situations, we ask for it and God brings it about.

However for most of us what God brings about through our intercession is quite small, because we do not play a crucial role in salvation history. Mary on the other hand does play a crucial role in salvation history and consequently God in his providence does bring about many things through Mary's intercession.

Hence a prayer offered to God through the intercession of his mother Mary stands a much better chance of being answered than one which is not offered through the intercession of Mary. And that is the way Mary can influence her son, just as we would expect a mother to be able to do.

And so, with Mary, what we need to see is that she is for us an intercessor or help, and also a model.

We believe that Mary is in heaven, and because of that, she prays with us, but also for us. This is not to say that you cannot go to Jesus directly, but we do believe that the unity between the Mary the Mother and her Son is unbreakable and very intimate. When we give honor to Mary, it is reflected back to God since we honor her for what He has done for her, with her, and through her. When we honor her, we honor him. We also honor Mary because there is something about her maternal qualities that soothe our souls and remind us of the great company of heaven, the home which we hope to enter one day. This is not true worship; that would be idolatry; but rather it is reverence. With Mary, we can become closer to Christ. Mary is close to God and can intercede for us, and just as we ask members of the church to pray for us on earth, we ask members of the Church in heaven to pray for us.

But also, we have so much to learn when we look to Mary. The catechism teaches that "By her complete adherence to the Father's will, to his Son's redemptive work, and to every prompting of the Holy Spirit, the Virgin Mary is the Church's model of faith and charity" and that "In a wholly singular way she cooperated by her obedience, faith, hope, and burning charity in the Savior's work of restoring supernatural life to souls. For this reason she is a mother to us in the order of grace." In Mary, we see humanity at its perfection. We can learn from her patience, as she did not understand fully what was said to her by Simeon about a sword piercing her heart or why her Son had to die, something Fr. Tuckwell did with his family. We can learn from her what true love is, in how she loved so selflessly. We can learn from her courage and fortitude, in how she

trusted in the plan of the Father. Mary helps us to become better people; far more than some ordinary woman, she is someone who can show us how to truly live.

As I shared before, my mom has always been very active in my life. And while there are so many memories, two that stand out to me are when I was going into summer vacation after kindergarten in the summer of 84, and then the Christmas of 1985.

That summer I saw a book at our school book fair that looked fantastic; it was about a dog of course. My mom got it for me and many others. I couldn't read at the time, but she helped me begin to sound out some of the words and discover the joy of reading.

Christmas of 1985 I came down with some nasty illness that made it quite miserable. I had a fever and was sick to my stomach. Of course got well enough just in time for school. But she would read to me, watch TV with me, and spend time with me and do all she could to give me comfort.

Mom didn't magically make me read; she didn't take away the illness. But she made things so much better by being at my side with her love, her prayers gave me hope.

All of us go forward in life, but all of us have ailments in trying to find the road to heaven. We can't hear what others tell us out of pride. We can't see because sin is the cataract on our soul. We can't remember what sin does because it becomes an addiction. This is the price we pay not for getting old, but for being human.

Thankfully though we don't drive down the road of life alone - Jesus is with us, but He also gives us the gift of His Blessed Mother, a woman who saw perfectly where she wanted to go, who listened attentively to what God told her to do, and who never forgot what it meant to be a daughter of God. On this feast day, may we welcome her into our hearts and follow her example, trusting that with her guidance and intercession, we can be formed into someone who shows us how to drive down the road of life into the Kingdom of Heaven. God knows we can't do it alone, thank God for the gift of our blessed Mother. Hail Mary, full of grace, pray for us.