

Mary: A Bridge Between Heaven and Earth

On a spring day in 1948, an 11 year old altar boy named John Lesjack stood with a water cruet in his hand, while his dad joined him at before Mass as a cantor. His high, sweet, clean tenor voice was captivating. He led the voices of the congregation to new heights, inspired them with joy to reach notes they didn't know they had within them. Nor had they realized when they first followed, how high his dad's voice could go as he sang "Ave Maria."

Saint Veronica Church in East Detroit was special that day. The other altar boys, in their black and white outfits, looked at John and smiled. He averted his eyes, but he was secretly proud and pleased that his father was signing on the other side of the sacristy.

His dad had been singing in barbershop quartets with friends at company picnics, in beer gardens and saloons. Never in church. People turned in their pews to see the source of those glorious sounds. His father's voice had already been recognized by talent scouts who had invited him to sing in the huge cathedral in downtown Detroit. They'd tempted him with promises of heavenly acoustics and large crowds. His dad refused. He felt unworthy. He had been invited to compete on talent shows such as Ted Mack's Amateur Hour and locally produced radio shows during the 30s and 40s. His dad declined all invitations to showcase his talents. He feared that he would lose too many friends.

None of John's five siblings sang with their father, nor did their mother join in. Mom sat between her oldest daughter and dad as he put enough energy into singing for everyone. Another parent might have said, "you should be singing too, everyone in church is singing." Not John's dad though. He was singing for his life.

As he sang, his father was lost in his own voice and in the beauty and feeling and release of the lyrics as he celebrated the rapture of his second year of sobriety. His singing came from a deep, loving, spiritual place in his soul. And music that comes from the soul is God-like.

Late one night, John found his dad on his knees in prayer near a chair in the living room, praying intensely, squeezing his rosary beads desperately. "Hail Mary, full of grace..." He changed a bead for each completed prayer. Looking back on this, John believes with all his heart that prayer was what gave his father the strength he needed to avoid alcohol. He attended no meetings. He saw no counselor. He knew no sponsor. Prayer was the only recovery program his father ever used to maintain his sobriety.

As he started praying the rosary, John recalls he remembers his dad wasn't sick in the mornings anymore, which meant he was able to work in the car factory regularly, which resulted in his being offered a promotion. He turned it down, explaining, as usual, that he would lose too many friends. But the regularity of the paychecks improved the family's lifestyle.

As his dad drove the family home from Mass in their black 1941 Hudson that memorable day, John remembers his dad overflowed with the good feelings that come from singing with your heart and soul and he sang his personal favorite, "You are my sunshine, my only sunshine, you make me happy, when skies are gray..."

Three weeks before Christmas that year, in his bed, at home, his father died from stomach cancer. Hundreds of friends attended his wake and funeral.

Though John's father has now been gone for many years, he knows his dad journeys with him every day, and is singing in the heavenly cathedral. And, when his life is less than musical, he prays, "Lord, help me remember through dad's spirit, that you are my sunshine."

Life for us all can sometimes be less than musical. And the question for us is what do we do to get our voice back, or to find happiness and hope again?

As kids, one of the first people we might run to for help was our mom. She didn't have the perfect answer all of the time. But if we were blessed with a loving and compassionate mother, we can remember that she was always there. And whether or not we had a loving mother or not, we have the perfect mother-model in Mary. She is always there. And she always points us in the direction of Jesus, who always has the answer. She also intercedes for us too.

We can think of Mary as our bridge. Humans sinned and there were consequences for not trusting God. But when we look at Mary, we see how she puts her complete trust in God, saying "Behold, I am the handmaid of the Lord, may it be done to me according to your word." Mary puts aside her desires, her fears, and trusts in God completely - and God sees her through.

This Thursday, we celebrate the Immaculate Conception of our Blessed Mother, and I think this invites us to think about two key things.

The first is to trust in God. It sounds easy, but as we all know it can be tough. We can think we can handle things on our own. We may be like Adam, fearful of our sins, so ignore them completely, or despair about them. We might perceive our distance or separation from God as too great to be reconciled. Maybe you think God doesn't look in your direction. Nothing could be further from the truth. But no matter what we have done, God's love is there. Remember, we are the reason for the season - God is in love with us, and seeks us out. Let Him enter into your soul. Look into your own secret room. Listen for the quiet whisper of the Holy Spirit in your life. We are children of the light. All we have to do is ask. God waits. He never tires of forgiving. He always wants to close the distance we may feel and heal us. So pray. Go to confession. Receive Holy Communion. Travel that road to true happiness. This week we also have our parish penance service on Monday night - I'll be joined by a number of other priests and we'll have confessions starting at 6:30 p.m. Hopefully you can join us to receive this wonderful gift of mercy.

The second is to turn to Mary as an intercessor for us. There are many kinds of spirituality in our Catholic faith, so explore them. With respect to our blessed Mother, we believe that she intercedes for us, and helps bring us closer to God. We believe that she is a role model for us. And we believe that she listens to us when we talk. Saying a prayer asking for Mary's help does not magically get rid of a sin or a battle like John's dad faced. But it gives us strength. Just as a long conversation with our earthly mothers about a tough life situation doesn't make it go away and is still something we have to face, because of that time spent and of our mother's love, we are better prepared for it, and the same is true with Mary. We can talk to her about our sins, our problems, our battles, and believe that she never looks at us with judgment, but always with love. She brings us closer to her son. So consider saying the rosary, and think about the words carefully. Think about the mysteries; of the fear but trust Mary and with the annunciation; of the kindness and love of the visitation and of how Mary visits us; of the joy but wonder at the birth of Jesus; of the fear Mary experienced when she lost Jesus but then found him in the Temple; or what Mary must have thought at the presentation when told "a sword will pierce your heart." Each of the mysteries of the rosary gives us so much to think about to help us in our spirituality and to grow closer to God. As one of my professors was fond of saying in seminary, "Mary is on our side" so we shouldn't be afraid to talk to our mother.

My parents here on earth in many ways point the way to heaven to me through how they live their lives, with their advice and counsel, and make me a better person. Mary does that for us too. What a gift we have in her - so let's never forget she is journeying with us as the bridge to her Son and that because of her, the road to Him is easier to travel.

Have a blessed week,

Fr. Paul