

PRESENTATION BROTHERS

Mary – Icon of Presence



Letter of the Congregation Leadership Team
Feast of the Presentation of Mary
21 November 2006

Dear Brothers,

In our letter 'Love and Speak the Truth' (Presentation Day 2005), we spoke of Mary in the following manner:

'For us Presentation Brothers, Mary has a special place in our lives. On November 21, we celebrate the Feast of Mary's Presentation. Mary invites us, too, to present our lives to God and to present Jesus to the world of our time. Pope Paul VI suggested that, in the contemporary world, we need to relate to Mary in a new way, as a real woman who is "truly our sister" on our faith journey'.

In this letter for Presentation Day 2006, we wish to offer you, Brothers, a more extended reflection on the presence of Mary of Nazareth, a woman of strength and wisdom, in our lives. What might the challenge posed by Pope Paul VI mean for us? How are we to relate to Mary 'in a new way, as a real woman who is "truly our sister"'? In particular, we wish to explore the rich theology and the radical challenge of our titular feast, that of the Presentation of Mary in the Temple.

A real woman who is “truly our sister” ...

It is all too easy to leave Mary as a statue on a pedestal. Thus, we can avoid the encounter with a real woman – with Miryam of Judah – ‘the woman of rebellion, the woman who changes things’. This is to block the grace that a real encounter with Mary might offer us today.

We need to reflect on our own experience of strong and loving women. Whether as mothers, sisters or friends, we have all known women who have loved, inspired and challenged us. Reflecting on our own experience of women will enable us to encounter the real humanity of Mary. We suggest this was the human path travelled by our founder, Edmund Rice. His devotion to Mary was no mere pious sentiment, but came as a result of the loving influence of women in his life. In today’s terms we would say he learned to integrate the feminine into his life. He knew that this was necessary for salvation and wholeness. Edmund knew that ‘it is not good for man to be alone’ and saw the need for the love and guidance of Mary on his spiritual journey.

Women in Edmund’s Human & Spiritual Journey

Visitors to the Prayer Garden at the Edmund Rice Heritage Centre, Mardyke, Cork come away with a new appreciation of the role and influence of women in the life of Edmund.

In the beauty and stillness of that sacred space, it is possible to commune with the spirits of those women who loved, nurtured and encouraged Edmund on his human and spiritual journey. He was fortunate to be surrounded by so much love. Mother, sister, wife, daughter – at different times and in various ways they all shaped him profoundly. When Edmund was only 27, his wife Mary died in childbirth and Edmund’s daughter Mary was born with handicap. So his love was tested in the crucible of suffering and pain.

As a man, Edmund Rice knew the love of women and he loved in return. The feminine influence in his life deepened his capacity for compassion and empathy. In turn, this issued forth in an energy for mission to all those lacking love, in particular those suffering poverty and injustice. Edmund was able to “open his whole heart to Christ present and appealing to him in the poor” because he had already experienced opening his heart in a human relationship. Given the real experiences of his life, we can begin to appreciate why Edmund, the mystic, drew so close to Mary, the mother of Jesus.

Mary and Our New Song

The presence of Mary was very strong at our Chapter and Mary is at the heart of our ‘singing to the Lord a new song’. The Chapter Vision Statement says:

‘During the Chapter we prayed often to Mary, the Patron of the Congregation. We were very conscious of her presence drawing us closer into the heart of Christ. May Mary always be present with us on our spiritual journey as we seek to be true disciples of her son, Jesus.’

Mary’s presence always points to Jesus. We believe that the key graced insight and challenge of our Chapter was to re-appropriate and deepen our experience of the presence of God in all of life. Mary is close to us on that ‘journey in faith and adventure in hope’ (Con. 8). The kernel of the Chapter Vision Statement is contained in the following statement:

‘We are gifted with a deep awareness of the presence of God in all of life – in our own hearts, in our relationships with our brothers and sisters, and particularly in young people who are poor or disadvantaged. We receive this gift through living in gospel communities that are passionate for God’s vision for the world. We respond to this gift through our mission of Christian formation.’

As **Presentation** Brothers, called to ‘Sing to the Lord a New Song’, we need to explore more deeply the theology of presence and radical challenge of our titular feast, that of the Presentation of Mary in the Temple.

Mary – Icon of Presence

Icons are like symbols. In the Eastern Church, an icon is understood to be “a visible expression of the invisible”. Orthodoxy believes that an icon is a dwelling place of God’s grace. Moreover, the effect of an icon is that it “sanctifies the place where it is located and creates for the faithful a tangible sense of Divine Presence”. In John’s gospel, Jesus is presented as the unique and totally adequate icon of God. Other than the face of Jesus Christ, the face of Mary is the one that is most frequently fashioned by the iconographers of the East for the purpose of facilitating the human encounter with the Divine Presence that is God. Thus, in our human encounter with Mary, we are drawn into the Divine Presence. The tradition of the Church, of both East and West, holds that God prepared Mary for the great mission of the Incarnation, of the Word becoming flesh. This is the truth that is celebrated in the tradition of Mary’s presence in the Temple. We, too, are called to allow the Word to become flesh in our lives.

And she danced, and the whole house of Israel loved her...

The account of the birth of Mary and her presentation in the Temple by her once barren parents, Joachim and Anna, is recorded in the Proto-gospel of James. In the account, we are told that she dwelt in the Temple until the age of twelve when it was time for her to be betrothed.

'In the ninth month Anna gave birth... When the child was *three* years of age... they (Joachim and Anna) ascended to the Lord's Temple. The priest welcomed her, kissed her, and blessed her: "The Lord God has exalted your name among all generations. In you the Lord will disclose the redemption to the people of Israel during the last days." And he sat her down on the *third* step of the altar, and the Lord showered favour on her. And she danced, and the whole house of Israel loved her. When she turned *twelve* ... Joseph took her into his care and Protection.' (Proto-gospel of James 5:5; 7:4-9; 8:3; 9:11) *1

This account gives us a window into the theology of the early Church in relation to Mary and how she was prepared for this most unique of all vocations, to be come the human Bearer of God (Theotokos).

The Proto-gospel of James gave rise to two great Marian feasts in the East, which were subsequently accepted in the West *2 The first major feast to be celebrated is that of 'The Birth of our Most Holy Lady the *Theotokos*' on September 8th. This is followed with another closely linked Marian feast, 'The Feast of the Presentation of Mary in the Temple', celebrated on November 21. *3

In both feasts, the work of God in preparing for the Incarnation is contemplated. Among the Orthodox, the mystery of the Feast of the Presentation of Mary is that "the Church breaks the silence of the Scriptures and shows the incomprehensible ways of Providence, which prepares the receptacle of the Word, 'the Mother predetermined before the ages'..." *4

*1 Robert J. Miller, *The Complete Gospels* (3rd ed.; San Francisco: Harper, 1994), 385-87

*2 The liturgical cycle of the Eastern Orthodox Church begins in September.

*3 John Baggley writes: "The historical origins of the Feast appear to be linked with the dedication of the Basilica of St. Mary the New in Jerusalem on 21st November 543." See John Baggley, *Festival Icons For the Christian Year* (London: Mowbray, 2000), 18. Leonid Ouspensky and Vladimir Lossky write: "It was to be adopted in the West only under Pope Gregory XI, who had it celebrated for the first time at Avignon in 1374." See Leonid Ouspensky, and Vladimir Lossky, *The Meaning of Icons* (Trans. G.E.H. Palmer and E. Kadloubovsky; New York: St. Vladimir's Seminary Press, 1999), 153.

*4 Ouspensky and Lossky, *The Meaning of Icons*, 153.

Presence and Silence

The Feast of the Presentation of Mary may also be described as 'The Feast of the Silence of Mary'. *5 St. Gregory Palamas (1296-1359) is perhaps the most prolific proponent of the feast in its history in the East. Of him, John Baggley writes: "He saw her preparation for her vocation as being accomplished through holy stillness, through the inner silence which can create the depth of heart that enables us to respond to God with great love." *6 This reflects an aspect of the Lucan portrait of Mary. After the birth of her son, Jesus, Luke tells us: "Mary treasured all these words and pondered them in her heart"(2:19).

The spirituality of the East has long understood Mary to be an icon whose contemplative presence in the Temple prepared her for the mission of becoming the new temporary dwelling place for the Word. At Cana she breaks her silence and speaks to the One she bore for the needs of others who are silent; today she continues to represent to Christ the need of the people of every age who are silent or who are made silent in the world (cf. Luke 2:51-52).

Elizabeth A. Johnson reflects this spirituality in her reading of the account of the Wedding at Cana:

'Her instruction, "Do whatever he tells you", charges the servants at the wedding to turn believably to Jesus, and they do so on the strength of her testimony. This tessera reflects the picture of a celebrative woman calling for more wine at the wedding, the spokeswoman of the hope of the disenfranchised and the poor, and an apostolic witness who leads others to Christ.' *7

The Anglican-Roman Catholic Statement on Mary (2004) recognizes this also. Reflecting on 'Mary in Luke's Birth Narrative', the authors write: "Mary is the one who in recollection looks beneath the surface of events (2:19, 51) and represents the inwardness of faith and suffering (2:35). Mary becomes the one who speaks for all the poor and oppressed who long for God's reign of justice to be established" [Arts. 14, 15).

Thus the Feast of the Silence of Mary in the Temple, re-interpreted in the light of the canonical Gospels, becomes, theologically, the feast of the voiceless and of those who are *made* voiceless in our world.

*5 Anne O'Leary writes: "On November 21st, therefore, the Eastern Church, with its rich theology of Spirit, celebrates the entry of Mary into the temple at Jerusalem as the moment of exchange between the Old Covenant and the New Covenant. In the Western Liturgy, the ending of the old dispensation and the Beginning of the new is celebrated on February 2nd, the *Feast of the Presentation of Jesus in the Temple* By his parents, Mary and Joseph (Lk 2:22ff.). "See Anne O'Leary, "Presentation Spirituality: Roots and Wings," *Presentation Studies* 10 (2000), 3-9.

*6 Bagley, *Festival Icons*, 18

*7 Elizabeth A. Johnson, *Truly Our Sister: A Theology of Mary in the Communion of Saints* (London: Continuum, 2004), 293.

The Presentation of Mary in the Temple – The Feast of the Voiceless

Brothers, we believe our exploration of the theology of our titular feast leaves us with a radical challenge. Mary, icon of presence, speaks for the voiceless, for those oppressed by poverty and injustice. As followers of Jesus, in the path of Edmund Rice, we can do no less. Our devotion to Mary and our celebration of this feast is hollow without concern for the poor and action for justice. A real encounter with Mary, woman of justice, will challenge the way we look at the world. It is simply not acceptable that:

- 1.1 billion people live on less than one dollar a day, and 852 million are hungry;
- 11 million children die of preventable diseases every year;
- 120 million children have no access to even the most basic education.

In a previous letter, “Go Forth into the World – Our Mission and Ministry”, we said the following:

“We are part of a generation that can change the fact that an accident of latitude determines whether a child lives or dies. As our Holy Father, Pope Benedict XVI wrote in his final message to the Synod of Bishops on 23rd October 2005, the sufferings of the poor ‘cannot remain extraneous to the celebration of the Eucharistic Ministry, which summons all of us to work for justice and the transformation of the world in an active and conscious fashion’. Indeed, he added that our care for those in need is ‘the criterion that will attest the authenticity of our Eucharistic celebrations’”.

In “Go Forth into the World”, we suggested a range of practical things that individual Brothers and Communities can do to deepen our involvement in the work of justice. In the spirit of our titular feast, we ask you again to undertake new actions at local level. At Congregational level, we are determined to advance the new challenge of advocacy, which is placed before us in our Chapter Vision Statement.

‘Many of our Brothers have made us aware of the poverty

*caused by systemic injustice in various parts of the world.
We will engage in advocacy work with policy makers on
behalf of people who are made poor.'*

(Chapter Vision Statement – 'Sing to the Lord a New Song')

'They have no wine ...'

At Cana, Mary is the one who notices 'they have no wine'. So many people in our world today 'have no wine'. The joy is gone out of their lives due to poverty, violence or injustice. Even within our Church, in many places, 'there is no wine'. People are starving for authentic spiritual experience and are not nourished by the expressions of spirituality they find in so many Churches. As Brothers, we are called to be ministers of joy and hope in our Church and in our world.

Mary says to us: "Do whatever he tells you!"

As **Presentation** Brothers of Edmund Rice, ours is a rich heritage and spirituality. The Church's faith calls her the Theotokos – the God bearer. Let us too be God-bearers to the people of our time. So we go forward in faith. We go forward with Mary, a real woman, who in the words of Paul VI is "truly our sister". May that most challenging and subversive of prayers, Mary's Magnificat, come alive for us in a new way as we celebrate our titular feast.

My soul proclaims your greatness, O my God,
and my spirit rejoices in God, my Savior.
For your regard has blessed me, poor, and a serving woman.
From this day all generations will call me blessed,
for you, who are mighty, have done great things for me; and holy is your
Name.
Your mercy is on those who fear you, from generation to generation.
You have shown strength with your arm.
You have scattered the proud in their hearts' conceit.
You have put down the mighty from their thrones,
and have lifted up the lowly.
You have filled the hungry with good things,
and have sent the rich away empty.
You have helped your servant Israel,
remembering your mercy,
as you promised to Abraham and Sarah,
mercy to their children forever. (Luke 1:46-55)

Brothers, we wish you a happy and joy-filled Presentation Day.

Your Brothers in Jesus and Edmund