

Episode: Mary: A Model of Dedication

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In the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit, Amen. My Lord and my God, I firmly believe that you are here, that you see me, that you hear me. I adore you with profound reverence; I beg your pardon for my sins and the grace to make this time of prayer fruitful. My Immaculate Mother, St. Joseph, my father and lord, my guardian angel, intercede for me.

Today, the Church celebrates the feast- or the Memorial of the Presentation of the Blessed Virgin Mary. Now for us to understand this feast, we have to go a little bit back to the origins of devotion to the Blessed Mother. In the early church, the Fathers of the Church came to focus on the mystery of our salvation and our redeemer, Jesus Christ. And they came to articulate ever more careful in the very nature of the Incarnation, how Jesus was true God, who became man and it was not God under the appearance of man, nor was he kind of like a minor God created by God, like, you know, in time, like a good creature and stuff. That's what some bishops said, like Arius, the bishop of Alexandria. He could not wrap his mind around the idea that he was true God and true- true man at the same time. So the Church had to condemn this- reject this. That's why we say in the Creed, he was born of the Virgin Mary, *Natus ex Maria Virgine, ex- ex Maria Virgine*, out of or from the Virgin Mary. And that's ,in a certain way, seems kind of contradictory to think that, you know, born of a virgin, since virgins, by nature, they cannot give birth, they are virgins. But of course, as the father's reflected and prayed about this, they came to realize that Mary was really the Mother of God, and that she had been specifically created for this purpose, and her perpetual virginity had to be defended to ensure that the child that she gave birth to was not of human intervention, but was really of God. He was born of the Virgin Mary. And he was like- he became like any other man, human, but without sin.

You'll recall that luminous interaction between Gabriel, the archangel, and Mary as he transmits this key message that she will give birth to a child, and how she was troubled, somewhat perplexed, because, well, she had already made a decision to remain a virgin. And- and she couldn't fit together these two ideas of being both virgin and mother at the same time because the angel was saying that she would give birth. Yeah, but she- she thought, wait, I'm vowed to be a virgin. So the angel said, okay, look, this is what's going to happen. The Holy Spirit will come upon you, and the power of the Most High will overshadow you- will overshadow you. So the holy- the holy one to be born of you will be called the Son of God. So okay, she's getting it now, okay, she's understanding- she will be like the Ark of the Covenant. It was God- it would be God who would do this. She would be the new Ark, the new tabernacle, like the new temple, where God would reside, and it would be the Holy Spirit who would have her conceive. And things were coming into place. She started- now she, of course, she understood, and of course she gave her complete *Fiat*, her complete, you know, acceptance of God's plan. This beautiful image of the power of the Most High

overshadowing her was an explanation right there, and there, how she would be the Mother of God. But I would say it was something she experienced already all her life, that the Holy Spirit had been accompanying her right from her Immaculate Conception, she felt overshadowed by this tender presence of God, the Holy Spirit. And I would say that when the angel said this must have confirmed what she already perceived throughout her life, that she had felt right from her very youth. That the power of God had been accompanying her. This- for us, this idea of a shadow, the shadow of God, to us, it seems somewhat dark and foreboding, you know, but- but for her, it really meant this luminous cloud of grace that guided and protected her all throughout her life and gave her purpose. She was the Mother of God, the *Theotokos*, as we say in Greek, the Mother of God. She's the Mother of God, the Mother of Christ and Our Mother.

So it's in this context of Mary as both virgin and mother that we celebrate today the Feast of the Presentation of Mary in the temple which has been celebrated for centuries on November 21st. The power of the Most High began with her Immaculate Conception in the womb of her mother, Anne, but took on a special though mysterious turn when she was presented there in the temple in Jerusalem. Now, it's not an event that was recorded in the scriptures, of course, but it does- doesn't mean that it didn't happen, or that we can't glean something special from it. You know, this memorial, this feast, this office, was celebrated in Jerusalem, it is said as early as the sixth century, and even the church was built there in honor of this mystery. And the Eastern Church was very interested in developing this feast, there were paintings and icons, and it began appearing also in the West in the 11th century.

We might think, well, if it's not a scripture, how did the Church come to know about Mary's presentation? Well, this account appears in some of the apocryphal literature, particularly in a proto-Gospel of St. James, apocryphal literature. Well, let's not be too- too frightened by the word apocryphal, because our modern understanding of the word suggests it's kind of like fake news, or it's false or even intentionally misleading. But really, the word *Apocrypha* means just hidden, and specifically for us, it designates the writings that claim to be of biblical authors. But in fact, the Church has never really accepted them in the canon, they're not inspired Scripture. So although they are not exactly historical or not inspired, certainly they were quoted by some of the Fathers of the Church, and they had, you could say, a certain authority, or maybe a relative value, where we can glean little bits and pieces out of them. You could say that the Apocrypha are like cloudy waters that still carry some nuggets of gold. So as we have to find these little jewels, these tiny gems that help give us a more clear picture of the mosaic that is the Blessed Virgin Mary and one set of Apocrypha that relate to Mary, focus on her- her early life, her birth. Another set focuses on her- the end of her life, like her assumption and coronation and all that. And so, you know, Christians have been intensely eager to know more about the life of- of our mother. And it's true, some okay, some got a little bit too eager and maybe, you know, figured out some pretty fanciful- fanciful stories. But some of those little gems we can find, like in the sand of the beach, and some of those are, like the names of Mary's parents, St. Ann, St. Joachim, and this story about Mary's presentation in the temple.

So it is said that Joachim and Anne brought the child Mary as a young child. So traditionally, probably around age three, brought her to the temple to consecrate her to God's service, paralleling Old Testament figures such as Hannah, who dedicated Samuel in the temple. So the presentation of Mary is a kind of prefiguring of her unique holiness and role in the history of salvation. Mary is like the new dwelling place of God. She's filled with the Holy Spirit from her childhood. She's preserved immaculate to be really the worthy Mother of Christ, that virgin, that virgin that is both virgin and mother. She's going to be the living

tabernacle that- the new living Ark of the Covenant, really the dwelling place of God, like the Holy of Holies. But it's not an ark made of silver or stone or jewels, but of her own sinless flesh. That's how she is, the new Ark of the Covenant. Indeed, St. John Damascene, and when the later Fathers of the Church in the east, he said that- that others presented Mary as a sacred plant, planted and nurtured in the temple by God's grace, highlighting thereby, he says, her- her total dedication and her purity.

So today's feast, the presentation of Mary in the temple really invites us to imitate Mary's obedience, her humility, but especially this consecration, this dedication to God's will. Because she was, like, totally dedicated to this plan. And there she is as a young girl, you know, young age, she's dedicated, and it's like underlines total call to personal holiness, her surrender to divine grace, which we too must embrace throughout our life, however our life might go. And as she's presented there in the temple, well, she's like being prepared for her role as a mediator, her role as mother of God, her role as ever virgin, and all that will- it'll all hang in the balance with her own decision at the Annunciation. And I would say that this presentation in the temple is a kind of revving up of the engines of her eventual *fiat* in front of the- the angel's revelation that she would be the mother of God. But you picture that the parents brought her there, understanding that she has a special role. They see this child, they dreamt about God's plans for her like well, in many ways, like many- many parents do. But somehow there they had received this grace to understand her mission. They were not attached to their own vision, to their own projects. Probably didn't know exactly what her mission was, but they knew it was pretty unique. And so there, the child's being readied for something great, something even beyond their understanding.

Now I mentioned that this feast, this memorial goes back to the sixth century in Jerusalem, but it was also a feast that was introduced into the liturgy in the West, in particular in the Diocese of Venice in the 16th century. And well, one reflection of that you may have seen it in the very famous painting by Titian from the 1530s for the *Scuola Grande*, the *Santa Maria della carita* in Venice. It's Venice. It's a school there. And he was commissioned because this feast had been introduced- okay, they told him, okay, make us a big mural of the presentation in the temple of Mary, her presentation. So Titian, when he was an up and coming artist, he was very versatile, you know, his full name, Tiziano Vecelio- Vecilio. He was very versatile, very adept painter, he's really like, quintessentially the High Renaissance, and it took him, like, four years to paint this massive painting. You can look it up, *The Presentation of Mary in the Temple* by Titian, or probably it will be there on the St. Josemaria Institute website, you can take a look at it. And it captures the moment described in the golden legend there in the apocryphal gospel of St. James. When Mary is going up unaided, up this long flight of stairs, she's looking up at the top of the stairs of the temple is this rather imposing figure of the temple priest with a couple of assistants next to him, and she's halfway up, but she's moving up with confidence. The priest is, well, he's meant to be the high priest of the temple, but, you know, you look at it, this is like a Catholic bishop, really. He's got red vestments, and he's got a long beard. He kind of looks like an Eastern monk, you can kind of discern the monastic habit below. But all around Mary there's this beautiful architecture, columns, people around standing filled with wonder and amazement. There are people looking down from the windows looking at this, this impressive event of this little child moving up with confidence, and she's dressed in the traditional blue with- with a sure foot, a kind of inner conviction of her mission. And she set a glow by this radiant mandola like aura- aura, you know, this- this light that was meant to visually mark her as the bearer of divine light. There she is walking up this radiant purity, this glow around her. She's the light bearer and the light bringer, really.

And I remember, you know, studying art history- you know, art historians characterize this painting as, you know, the height of the Renaissance, and one of the great products of Venetian Art and stuff and- and

they- they identify in this painting the different figures that Tiziano or Titian painted. They talk about all the grand scale of the painting, the complex narrative composition so forth, how perspective is beautifully sophisticated, and all this stuff. And, yeah, it's- it's a very beautiful painting in that in that sense, but what I remember, and this is like 40 years ago, or something like that, I remember having a lecture about this painting years ago at the university. At that time, we were looking at these black and white slides in the classroom. And it was this very enthusiastic German professor who spoke with a thick accent and great confidence about his knowledge of this painting, and he insisted, though we knew the basics of it, that we look more carefully and see if we could identify what else Titian was saying to us here about Mary's life, and, well, we just looked at it. Okay, she's going upstairs, she's filled with light okay, yeah. But then he said, you don't see it- you don't see it. And then it was a certain glee and a great confidence- that he pointed out that Mary was going up these stairs, right? And she was rising with confidence, okay, yeah, we knew that. But he said, well, keep going, and where does your eye eventually set? And sure enough, there's, well, there's architecture and stuff but in the end, at the kind of back of the painting, there are these- they're like this- this scenes of these mountains, the Dolomites in- in Italy, with a very specific peak that you can identify, called the *Marmolada in Cadore*. It's very recognizable. He showed us a picture of the actual mountain as it is today and stuff. And it's true, okay, yeah, that's, yeah, okay, yeah, that's the same mountain, okay. But he says, then now look above, you'll see these billowing clouds. And what do you see there? And we looked at the billowing clouds, and we said, indeed, those clouds make up the form of a cross. He said, There you see- he says, I remember him saying that- there you see, there is the foreshadowing of the cross that mount of Calvary where Mary will stand at the foot of the cross with her son, realizing, to the full, her mission. And I remember there's this quiet in the classroom as we reflected on well, it was clouds, I mean, it kind of looked like a cross, but it was a cross. And we realized that this presentation was a preparation also for this key event in her life. She's only small, but she's already totally dedicated, totally invested in God's purpose for her, and she's so invested, she's willing to suffer, to die for this, she's willing to stand at the foot of the cross for all that it means in the history of salvation.

So the presentation is not merely a painting for us we know, or a nice story or an apocryphal story. You know, it can embed in us really a deeper sense of our dedication to our own vocation, to our mission in life, a deeper meaning of our life and- and we have the Blessed Mary as a great model of following Christ to the full of total dedication. And, you know, we may sometimes identify our happiness with all those things kind of that make us feel good and pleasant, you know, that- that we like and but the most stable source of true happiness, true joy, really ultimately comes when we truly live a dedicated life, where our body and our soul is completely dedicated, committed to, given over to God's plan for us, even if that may include pain or even, yeah, hardship. And this is the way the church has always framed Mary's perpetual virginity. She was the Virgin before birth. That is, the child that was born was not of man, was not of human seed. She was born of God- the child was born of God through her, but she was also born- she was also virgin during the birth of Christ, but she was also a virgin after. She was perpetually a virgin, meaning that her mission was not merely to give birth to divine child as such only. The Holy Spirit accompanied her through all her life to protect her total dedication, so much so that she was assumed, body and soul into heaven because she never- she never knew corruption. She- she continues her maternal mission. She intercedes for us as mother right now from heaven with her son. It's because she was so dedicated to her mission.

Let us ask her now to intercede for us so that really our dedication also may be complete, may be unreserved. So that we can also embrace our own unique mission in the plan of salvation. Somewhere there too, in our life, we have to be completely dedicated. That's what the Blessed Virgin's purpose of her virginity is, or it's rather, it's a sign of her dedication. Lord, I too want to be dedicated. I want to give my

life for you in my circumstances, in my work, in my family. I want to be a sign of that dedication. The Blessed Mother will intercede for us and make this a true reality in our life.

I thank you, my God, for the good resolutions, affections, and inspirations that you have communicated to me in this time of prayer. I ask your help in putting them into effect. My Immaculate Mother, St. Joseph, my father and lord, my guardian angel, intercede for me.