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Cause of Our Joy

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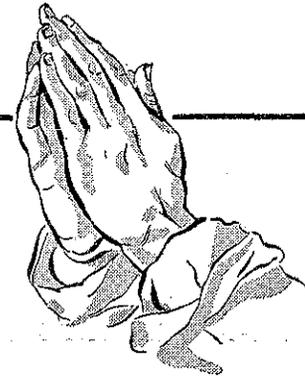
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Cause of Our Joy

by KILIAN McDONNELL, O.S.B.

“**B**EHOLD, this child is destined for the fall and rise of many in Israel and for a sign that shall be contradicted. And thy own soul a sword shall pierce.” These words the ancient Simeon spoke to Mary as he held the Christ-Child in his arms, and in speaking them he defined an essential element in Mary’s vocation. She is called to suffering. She will suffer because of her Child. Indeed, her vocation to pain is so inseparable from what God destined her to be that we call her “Mother of Sorrows.”

We will never understand the meaning of Mary unless we understand the sorrow of Mary. Her life witnesses to that deepest of spiritual truths: ultimately the refusal to suffer is the refusal to love. Because she never refused the sorrow of her vocation, she attained the perfect love: pure, unselfish, sacrificing even when all seemed to have been sacrifice, constant when constancy was sorely tried. She is in truth the Mother of Sorrows.

But however truly Mary’s vocation is defined in terms of sorrow, we have not understood her unless we go beyond sorrow. There is something more basic to the meaning of Mary than pain. Her vocation to suffer is a vocation only for time. But her vocation to joy is a vocation which began in time and endures now in eternity. In time her joy is often simultaneous with pain, but deeper than pain, more lasting than sorrow, is the joy of the Mother of God. We have ill defined her until we also define her in terms of joy.

With the Church we can go further than saying that Mary’s joy is a thing that began in time and lasts for eternity. Before time began, God thought of Mary and looked with desire to the moment in time when He would bring forth this wonder of His power. It is in this sense that the Church, in her prayers, applies the following words to Mary: “The Lord made me when first He went about his work, before His creation began. . . . When I was born,

the mountains had not yet sunk on their firm foundations, and there were no hills; not yet had He made the earth, or rivers.” From all eternity, God rejoiced in the glory of the Mary who would one day come from His hands.

In the Annunciation scene, we sense that somehow this desire of God, unfathomable and great beyond human knowing and speaking, is about to be fulfilled. “Hail, full of grace, the Lord is with thee. Blessed art thou among women.” The angel Gabriel speaks words which brought joy to the Father in heaven who sent the message, to Gabriel who spoke it, to Mary who heard it, and now to us who repeat it. Mary would not be “full of grace” without having the joy of God. The Lord would not be with Mary in that primary and immediate sense implied by Gabriel without the delight of God being with her to some large degree. And because she is “Mother of divine grace,” she is also the Mother of holy joy. Her mission to bring the grace of God to man cannot be separated from her mission to bring the joy of the Lord to men.

Joy is not easily measurable. This is true of human joys, and, of course, there is an unmistakable invalidity about any attempt to measure divine joy. The quiet intensity of God’s delight is far removed from the nervous, sometimes frantic, pleasure of those who pursue fun with a kind of desperation. And because the joy of the Lord is more interior than the fun of the world, it more often escapes our notice. It is the very interiority of Mary’s joy that makes it hidden.

But on occasion even the most interior and spiritual of joys is externalized, reduced to word and action. When Mary goes to visit Elizabeth she gives expression to the joy of her vocation in the *Magnificat*. There is not, perhaps, a more eloquent witness to the godly gladness of her life, her spirit, and her work in this world than this hymn of joy: “My soul magnifies the

Lord; my spirit has found joy in God, who is my Saviour. . . . Behold, from this forward all generations will count me blessed; because He who is mighty, He whose name is holy, has wrought for me His wonders.”

All the graces, privileges, and titles given to Mary are, in the end, directed to and reducible to her motherhood. If she is sinless—“You are all beautiful” sings the Church—it is because she is to be the Mother of Christ. If her body rises—“Mary has been taken up into heaven; the angels rejoice” we pray on the feast of the Assumption—it is because she mothered the Christ who rose from the tomb. Because she was destined for Motherhood, she was destined for joy. Because the joy of Christ the Son belongs first, after Him, to Mary the Mother, the Church never separates them. Christmas, for instance, is a feast of Christ. But it is also a feast of Mary. And so the Church prays on Christmas, “We celebrate that most sacred day on which the inviolate virginity of blessed Mary brought our Saviour into this world.” To celebrate the birth of the Son is to celebrate the joy of the Mother.

Anyone who has seen a mother’s sorrow at the death of a son has some knowledge of Mary’s joy when Christ appeared to her after the Resurrection, as tradition tells us He did. From this moment until her death she will live the beauty of the words “He is risen. He lives.” The Resurrection and Ascension of her Son are prophetic of her own Assumption—an event of great happiness. The Church calls all in heaven and earth to rejoice with her: “Let us all rejoice in the Lord, celebrating a festival day in honor of the Blessed Virgin Mary, for whose Assumption the angels rejoice and give praise to the Son of God.”

Because Mary’s vocation in eternity, as in time, is to give us the fruit of her womb, Jesus, there is no joy like to hers. Because she brings us our Lord she is truly the “Cause of our Joy.”