

**ADDRESS OF HIS EXCELLENCE ARCHBISHOP PIERRE
APOSTOLIC NUNCIO TO THE UNITED STATES
NATIONAL PRAYER BREAKFAST
HOLY NAME RETREAT CENTER, HOUSTON, TEXAS
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I am very happy to be with you today. As the Apostolic Nuncio, the Holy Father's representative to the United States, I want to express His Holiness' spiritual closeness and paternal affection for all of you and to assure you of his prayers for you and for the fruitful work of the apostolate of this retreat center. I also want to thank Father Barbieri for his kind invitation to be here.

We gather during this month of October, a month dedicated to praying the Rosary and in doing so to honoring the Virgin Mary, the first missionary disciple. I think a retreat house such as this is more necessary than ever. The world is filled with noise – loud voices, screaming at each other; people talking past one another; strident voices of protest and division. There is a lot of talk and little listening. Seldom is there time for silence, a silence so necessary for listening.

Of this, Pope Francis has said:

Mary knew how to listen to God. Be careful: it was not merely hearing, a superficial word, but it was “listening”, that consists of attention, acceptance and availability to God. It was not in the distracted way with which we sometimes face the Lord or others: we hear their words, but we do not really listen. Mary is attentive to God. She listens to God. (Address of the Holy Father for the Conclusion of the Marian Month of May, 31 May 2013)

Today, I would like to reflect with you upon the Silence of Mary; it is a silence that speaks to us of the need to be attentive to God. The reflections on the silence of Mary are inspired by the great Chilean Franciscan (Capuchin) Father Ignacio Larranaga.

The Silence of Mary

Mary is a woman of silence. She is called Mary of Nazareth, but the name Nazareth never appears in the Old Testament. Flavius Josephus' two works *Jewish Antiquities* and *The Jewish War* never mention Nazareth. No Roman map from the time mentions Nazareth among the towns and villages of the Empire. Nazareth is silence. Only the Gospels mention Nazareth, and yet the mother of Jesus is Mary of Nazareth – a woman of silence.

We do not know where or when Mary was born. Tradition tells us that her parents were Joachim and Ann, but there is no historical proof of this. The origins of Mary are hidden in silence. Even in the Gospels, Mary appears at the beginning and then disappears, practically until the end. Her life with Joseph and with the Child Jesus are largely hidden in silence. She is there at the beginning, at his birth on that silent night; at the Presentation in the Temple; at His finding in the Temple; in Cana; Capernaum; Calvary and in the Cenacle, but in the last three appearances in the Gospel, she says nothing. All is silence. Only God is important.

Mary is transparent and remains in silence like a window. Let us imagine that we are in a house, sitting in the arm chair, contemplating various scenes and beautiful landscapes: people strolling on the street, trees and birds, splendid panoramas, stars in the night. But to whom do we owe all this? Who realizes the presence and function of the windowpane? If instead of glass, we

had a wall, would we see such marvelous things? The window is so humble that silently it lets the exterior beauty into our life. This is exactly what Mary did. She was, like the window, so pure, so spotless, so disinterested and humble that she let the whole mystery of God and his salvation come through her, while she remained in silence. She was the Mother who silently lost herself in the Son.

As a disciple, she is an attentive listener. Pope John Paul II called her “the woman of silence and listening.” It is difficult to listen amid the noise of our world, but Mary had a spirituality of listening to the Word of God, deriving from the *Shema* (Dt 6:4): *Hear, O Israel!* If, like Mary, we want to take our vocation and mission seriously, then we need silence.

In *I Want to See God*, Blessed Marie-Eugene de l’Enfant Jesus wrote:

Any task at all that requires a serious application of our faculties, presupposes the recollection and silence that render it possible. The scientist needs silence to prepare his experiments. The philosopher recollects himself in solitude to put order into his thoughts and penetrate into them. The silence that the thinker is avid for, that his intellectual energies may not be disturbed in their reflections, is still more necessary for the spiritual person, that the whole soul may be applied to the search of its divine object.

The Annunciation

The scene of the annunciation is a golden narrative. In this scene, the presence of God pulsates, as though we are to witness the eruption of a decisive event in the history of the world. Seemingly the angel presides over the scene. Mary is silent. As usual, we feel that she occupies a corner distant from the scene. The young girl observes, reflects and keeps silence with the attitude of Psalm 123:2: “*As the eyes of a maid are on the hands of her mistress, so intently our eyes fixed on the Lord.*” Mary expresses only one question and one declaration.

At the Annunciation, Gabriel finds her in silence and greets her. While many translations say, “Hail Mary, full of grace,” in Greek, the Angel says, “*Rejoice, full of grace.*” Hearing these words, Mary must have immediately thought of the words of Zephaniah (3:14-17): *Rejoice, daughter of Zion; shout for joy, Israel ... the King of Israel, the Lord, is in your midst.*” What was spoken once to a whole people was now uttered to her! It is interesting to note that in Greek, the words joy (*chará*) and grace (*charis*) go together.

The angel says, “Rejoice, full of grace. The Lord is with you.” Never has anyone heard such a greeting! What was it? An internal presence? Was it a spoken discourse or a silent one? Whatever it was, the young girl was declared by heaven to be the privileged one – loved more than any other woman on earth. Mary was greatly “troubled”.

But what does this mean? Maybe she was perplexed or confused. Maybe it was the equivalent to when a person blushes, because she sees the disproportion between what is said and the image she has of herself. She is one filled with great humility. And then the request is made of her.

St. Bernard of Clairvaux describes the drama:

You have heard, O Virgin, that you will conceive and bear a son; you have heard that it will not be by man but by the Holy Spirit. The angel awaits an answer; it is

time for him to return to God who sent him. We too are waiting, O Lady, for your word of compassion; the sentence of condemnation weighs heavily upon us.

The price of our salvation is offered to you. We shall be set free at once if you consent. In the eternal Word of God we all came to be, and behold, we die. In your brief response we are to be remade in order to be recalled to life.

Tearful Adam with his sorrowing family begs this of you, O loving Virgin, in their exile from Paradise. Abraham begs it, David begs it. All the other holy patriarchs, your ancestors, ask it of you, as they dwell in the country of the shadow of death. This is what the whole earth waits for, prostrate at your feet. It is right in doing so, for on your word depends comfort for the wretched, ransom for the captive, freedom for the condemned, indeed, salvation for all the sons of Adam, the whole of your race.

Answer quickly, O Virgin. Reply in haste to the angel, or rather through the angel to the Lord. Answer with a word, receive the Word of God. Speak your own word, conceive the divine Word. Breathe a passing word, embrace the eternal Word.

*Why do you delay, why are you afraid? Believe, give praise, and receive. Let humility be bold, let modesty be confident. This is no time for virginal simplicity to forget prudence. In this matter alone, O prudent Virgin, do not fear to be presumptuous. Though modest silence is pleasing, dutiful speech is now more necessary. Open your heart to faith, O blessed Virgin, your lips to praise, your womb to the Creator. See, the desired of all nations is at your door, knocking to enter. If he should pass by because of your delay, in sorrow you would begin to seek him afresh, the One whom your soul loves. Arise, hasten, open. Arise in faith, hasten in devotion, open in praise and thanksgiving. Behold the handmaid of the Lord, she says, be it done to me according to your word. (Bernard of Clairvaux, Hom. 4, 8-9, *Opera Omnia, Edit. Cisterc.* 4 (1966), 53-54.)*

In her would be fulfilled the promise of the long-expected Messiah – the one who brings joy and grace to the world! She is to bear the Child who will be the Savior, the Son of God.

Once she gives her consent, she enters into a silent passivity. In an attitude of **abandonment**, she submits herself to the course of the mystery. The Holy Spirit overshadows her and in her performs the Mystery. The blessed fruit of her womb begins to grow – in silence – and she belongs entirely to the Lord, surrendering to Him, allowing Him to conquer.

This “passivity” in reality is her fidelity. The Virgin Mary surrenders to the will of the Father, allowing every initiative to come from Him and executing every desire of His in fidelity and simplicity, not in fear but in love. We will never sufficiently understand that is much easier to conquer than to be conquered. We will never understand enough that the “here I am” of all the men and women in the Bible is the final secret of all spiritual and human greatness and of all fruitfulness. This path to holiness is particularly difficult for the men and women of our day, so bent on doing everything themselves, relying on human ability more than on God’s grace.

After all this high drama, the angel departed (Lk 1:38). Then, there was a great silence. What did Mary feel at that moment? Dazzled? Crushed under the weight of the Mystery? Fright? Surprise? Joy?

Any woman in Israel would have been ecstatic had she experienced what Mary encountered in the annunciation. Since the time of Abraham, but especially after the kingship had been established, millions of Jewish women had harbored one golden dream: to be the mother of the Messiah. Additionally, there was a popular legend according to which every woman who gave birth to a son would have an indirect share in the glory of the future Messiah. In other words, every Jewish mother would participate in the motherhood of the Messiah, even if it came centuries in the future.

At the moment of the Annunciation, it was announced to Mary that this fantastic dream harbored by so many women in Israel would be realized in her *and* in a miraculous manner. Now if a woman in such circumstances is still able to control her emotions and remain in complete silence, she must possess an outstanding maturity. How was it that she was so mature and able to remain in silence?

In the first place, Mary was a contemplative woman, and like all contemplatives she possessed a great maturity. The contemplative is one who is selfless. She is to, be precise, an admiring soul, ever grateful. She has the capacity for being amazed. She is never all to herself or self-centered; she is always in a state of “exodus”, of going out to the Other. Living in the contemplative there is always a You, an Other. Psychiatry tells us that the capacity for amazement and wonder is in complete opposition to narcissism. I imagine that is how Mary was.

Mary, being an authentic contemplative, has an interior strength. The “Magnificat” demonstrates this, because in the entire canticle she hardly references herself, except as the “lowly handmaid”. She acknowledges that all generations will call her “blessed” because the *Almighty has done great things for her*. To a woman like Mary, with such a capacity for grateful wonder, “her” things do not have any importance; only the things of God do. She lives *detached* from the things of the world.

Hanging over the Abyss

To understand Mary more fully, we must understand her culture. We might apply a rule: whatever was common and normal in her times and in her village, was common and normal for Mary. At age 12, she would have been declared “*gedulah*”, no longer a child but an adult, marriageable. Luke recounts that God sent the angel to a “*virgin betrothed to a man named Joseph*.” Typically, engagement would have lasted a year, with courtship, espousals, and eventually a nuptial procession to the house of her future husband. Mary would have stayed in her father’s house and not allowed to be alone with Joseph. Virginity had to remain during this time and rigorous “checks” were involved to see that it was preserved. To be found pregnant would have meant accusations of adultery, divorce and stoning.

Now, Mary was pregnant by the Holy Spirit before she was married, and she remained silent. Thus, Mary was hanging over the abyss. Here the *drama* of Mary’s silence begins. What was she to do? Explain exactly what had happened? Who would believe it? What could she do? Consult a person of complete trust? She did not do it. She remained quiet, abandoned into the hands of the Father.

When a person lives intensely in the presence of God, when a soul experiences truly and vitally that God is the infinite treasure, the most loving Father who is all good and the Supreme Good, that he is sweetness, patience, fortitude, then the human being can experience such vitality, joy and delight, that all things earthly seem insignificant next to God.

After tasting the love of the Father, all things seem worthless. God is such a wonder that one who experiences him feels totally free. The “I” is taken up by the “You”. *Perfect love casts out all fear.* This, I believe, is what happened to Mary. During the months of pregnancy, Mary must have experienced the Lord with intensity but also with a gentleness and tenderness. Psalm 118:6 reads: *The Lord is with me. I fear not. What can mortal man do against me?* Mary remained free – free from fear, free to love. She remained free and silent.

Joseph, the Just Man – the Silence of Joseph

She remained silent. She did not tell Joseph. Why not? Events unfolded in this way: one day the news reached Joseph – how, we do not know – that Mary was pregnant. Not wishing to cause a public scandal against Mary, he decided to divorce her quietly. He had just begun the formalities when God unveiled the mystery to him in a dream. Joseph’s reaction is understandable – sort of. It would have been among the greatest humiliations to know that one’s wife or betrothed had not been faithful. The normal reaction would have been violence, thoughts of betrayal, like being stabbed in the back one hundred times. Why didn’t Joseph react this way?

Perhaps, it was that Mary’s being immaculate was reflected in her face. From the reaction of Joseph, we can presuppose that before the events he must have felt something toward Mary that was akin to admiration or even veneration. Joseph was a “just” man – sensitive to the things of God. Beyond Mary’s attractiveness, he must have sensed in her something special, something different, a mystery.

Confronting the “rumors” about Mary, he must have thought: “It cannot be.” It was impossible that such a charming young woman could have stumbled in that way. His esteem for Mary was so high that he decided not to give way to anger and violence, but to suffer in silence the whole situation, eventually leaving Nazareth – provided that his beloved Mary was not mistreated. All of this speaks to the veneration Joseph had for his beloved Mary. This teaches us something too about Joseph: He was sensitive to the things of God, worrying more about others than himself, full of understanding and forgiveness, capable of controlling himself from falling into a rushed decision, capable of trusting and preferring to suffer himself rather than have others suffer. He was capable of loving unconditionally.

Reverence

But why did Mary not say anything to him? Why did she keep silent? Did she think him incapable of understanding? I suspect that it was a seal of deep respect in the presence of a tremendous mystery. Mary remained overwhelmed and profoundly moved by the Mystery of the Incarnation. It may have been like a view seen by a mountain-climber, who upon reaching the summit selfishly guards the panorama, cherishing the view which can never be forgotten. This was all so unique, intimate and sacred that it appeared to her that to share it with another human being, even someone noble like Joseph, would be too much. To be faithful to her God, Mary was disposed to suffer any consequence – divorce, stoning, rejection, solitude – with her silence. God was her reward. The Mother remained in silence, unconcerned, tranquil.

The Lord was moved by her ***silent fidelity***. He came to her assistance and in extraordinary way by revealing himself to Joseph, explaining things to him, dispelling his fears and any rumors that Mary had done something shameful. He invited Joseph to undertake a tremendous responsibility – to be the foster father of his only Son... and Joseph would have to do this in silence.

From that moment on, Joseph could not but approach Mary with an infinite reverence. This revelation must have confirmed his intuition about how special Mary was. Now Joseph was “touched by God” so much that whatever affective and merely human bonds of love he had for Mary were now elevated and transformed. To Joseph she was more than an attractive girl; she was the revered shrine of the living God.

One can speculate on Joseph and his plans for a life with Mary. He too must have had hopes and dreams of what their future together would be like; how they would interact daily; where they would live; how he would support her, etc. But then, all his plans changed. All his hopes and dreams had to die for God’s hopes and dreams for them and for us.

Between them, they would take care of and protect Jesus, the Son of God, the fruit of Mary’s womb. God had chosen that house and that marriage as a special dwelling, holier than the ancient Ark of the Covenant. We might reflect on our own home. Is it a place where God dwells?

Joseph’s reaction to the angel’s revelation is interesting. He immediately took initiative, making preparations for the nuptial procession and taking Mary into his home. God had entrusted to him the care of Mary and the Child. He had to squelch the rumor against the Mother and later against the Child. He made haste to live his vocation and to do his duty. He was silent in hearing God’s call and silent after he heard God’s call, never revealing the mystery of the Mary’s conception. He maintained a sacred silence. But it was through Joseph that the Messiah could be born of the House of David and the promises of the Lord could be fulfilled.

Conclusion

Sometimes the greatest mysteries of our faith – the greatest miracles – happen in silence. Even Jesus’ burial, his three days in the tomb and his glorious Resurrection occurred in silence. I conclude by simply inviting you each day to make time for silent prayer – to listen to the voice of the Lord so that you may know how, following the example of Mary, to carry out His will in your daily life.

Finally, I offer you the words of St. Teresa of Calcutta, taken from her book *In the Heart of the World*:

We need to find God, and he cannot be found in noises and restlessness. God is the friend of silence.... The more we receive in silent prayer, the more we can give in active life. We need silence to be able to touch souls. The essential thing is not what we say, but what God says to us and through us. Jesus is always waiting for us in silence. In this silence, he listens to us and speaks to our souls. And there, we will hear his voice... In this silence we find a new energy and a real unity. God’s energy becomes our energy, allowing us to perform things well. There is a unity of our thoughts with his thoughts, of our prayers with his prayers, of our actions with his actions, of our life with his life. (TERESA OF CALCUTTA, *IN THE HEART OF THE WORLD: THOUGHTS, STORIES AND PRAYERS*, ED. BECKY BENENATE. NOVATO, CALIFORNIA: NEW WORLD LIBRARY, 2010)

This is exactly what happened in silence in the lives of Mary and Joseph. It is my hope and prayer for you that it may happen in your lives so that more souls may be touched by the grace of God.

Thank you.