

1. The Lord's Servant

²⁶In the sixth month, God sent the angel Gabriel to Nazareth, a town in Galilee, ²⁷to a virgin pledged to be married to a man named Joseph, a descendant of David. The virgin's name was Mary. ²⁸The angel went to her and said, "Greetings, you who are highly favored! The Lord is with you."

²⁹Mary was greatly troubled at his words and wondered what kind of greeting this might be. ³⁰But the angel said to her, "Do not be afraid, Mary, you have found favor with God. ³¹You will be with child and give birth to a son, and you are to give him the name Jesus. ³²He will be great and will be called the Son of the Most High. The Lord God will give him the throne of his father David, ³³and he will reign over the house of Jacob forever; his kingdom will never end."

³⁴"How will this be," Mary asked the angel, "since I am a virgin?"

³⁵The angel answered, "The Holy Spirit will come upon you, and the power of the Most High will overshadow you. So the holy one to be born will be called the Son of God.

³⁶Even Elizabeth your relative is going to have a child in her old age, and she who was said to be barren is in her sixth month. ³⁷For nothing is impossible with God."

³⁸"I am the Lord's servant," Mary answered. "May it be to me as you have said." Then the angel left her.¹



It was the annual Christmas candle lighting service at the seminary where I taught and this year it was my privilege to bring the sermon. The sanctuary was packed out; townspeople as well as students loved those services and attendance was always high. To introduce the sermon I asked the congregation, "Not counting our Lord, which biblical character is your favorite?" It took a few minutes for the congregation to warm up, but soon names were flying. "Moses!" "Abraham!" "Peter!" "Paul!" After five minutes or so, things cooled down and I asked the congregation to reflect on the fact that no woman was mentioned. Hence, Mary, God's selection for the mother of our Lord, was never mentioned. Maybe that is the way Mary would have wanted it, but it was an open door for what I had to say.

Her Complete Surrender

The text above was the text for my sermon, with the focus on Mary's response to the divine messenger: ³⁸*I am the Lord's servant," Mary answered. "May it be to me as you have said." Then the angel left her.* Certainly Mary's remarkable statement deserves some attention; there is nothing like it in other Scripture. Caussade picked up on this as

¹ Luke 1, New International Version.

well. And why not, Mary is the most revered woman in Christian history. Even evangelical Christians reluctantly pay Mary her dues. Caussade observes,

[Mary] was the simplest of humans and the one who made the most complete surrender of herself to God. Her laconic reply to the angel—“*Let what you have said be done to me*” (Luke 1:38)—embodies all the mystical theology of her ancestors. This, then as now, meant the most direct and wholehearted surrender to God’s will, however it revealed itself.²

Our Most Complete Surrender

I have underlined some parts of the quote from Caussade. Caussade was speaking of Mary, of course, but much more than just her; he was speaking of you and me. Caussade says Mary was the “simplest of humans” and I suppose he was right. She certainly represented the lowest rung of the social ladder of her day. I have often wondered why God chose this maiden to be the bearer of the world’s Savior. I now think that she gives hope to all of us who have worked hard and achieved little, who barely make it from day to day. *In many ways, Mary is a mirror for the poor.*

Have you been to Haiti? There you will see some of the world’s poorest peoples. Workers usually make a dollar or so a day. It is not unusual to see people scooping water for family use from the street after a rain, for a mother to have one pair of shoes, maybe flip-flops, or for the daily diet to revolve around beans and rice. I think Mary would have understood modern Haitians better than modern Americans. And God chose her!

Caussade says *she made the “most complete surrender” to God’s will*. I checked this out in the rest of the New Testament. No other follower of our Lord spoke of his or her relationship to God in such terms as this maiden of Israel. They were all surrendered to the Lord; I am not suggesting they weren’t. I am saying that in the face of the angel’s message that she willingly, eagerly, and completely opened her life to God, even with all of the social judgments she would face from family and others. How old was Mary? What...probably 16, maybe a bit younger. Mary could never be a politician, a diva, or a businesswoman. No, Mary represented the need of Israel: poor, powerless, and weak, yet she was the Lord’s chosen. Caussade is right, Mary’s commitment was “direct and wholehearted.”

² Caussade, Abandonment to Divine Providence, p. 22.

The issue with Mary is the same as with us: the will of God. Caussade introduces us to what will be a recurring theme in his writing: God's will is good even though it is often clouded in obscurity. Faith is the ability to say "Yes" to God when we cannot figure out exactly what is happening or why. And Mary will always be an example, perhaps *the* example, of what our faith should be in such moments. This is precisely what we are urged to pray for in the Lord's Prayer, that the kingdom of God will come on earth, that God's will will be done—and we are eager and willing to do what is required of us.

Mary lived in the present moment. Did you sense that? Reread Luke 1 to see what I mean. The angel did not try to explain what God wanted from her; *the future was withheld from her*. She did not need to know more than what God wanted of her at that time. Often when we sense God's leading, if we are apprehensive about it, we want the Lord to explain Himself. Sometimes we even try to bargain with God, or even make demands of God if we do what He wants.

Like Mary, we are called to say "Yes" to God without any concern for additional knowledge, guarantees, or rewards. Like the soldier obeying what his superior says without having to know anything else, so we are called to say "Yes" instantly, except we have a deep inner joy because we know that whatever God asks of us is for our good. We may not see how things will work out at all, yet we are called to trust God. Failure to do what God asks is the same as saying we do not think He knows what He is doing and that we know better than Him what we should do. "I do not mean that," you say? Yes you do or you would be about obeying rather than arguing and trying to justify what you think.

Like Mary, you and I are called to live one day at a time. We are usually told enough to know that our lives will be watched over by God who loves us. Like Mary, we can live this kind of life with joyful abandon, trusting God's good will for us. And like Mary, we can bear what misunderstanding may come our way because we have declared our fidelity to God, regardless of the cost. Our commitment to God is filled with promise, unexpected turns, and deep joy. The way will surely be painful at times and we will be tempted to doubt, to hesitate, or to turn away from God. Yet, if we are faithful, as God is faithful, we will find that the way of God's will is a way of divine pleasure and deep happiness. If you know what I mean, you are one of the favored ones.

In All Things

Caussade formed a prayer to help him in his attempt to do all things to the glory of God. For us it is something of a summary prayer when we look at Mary's devotion to the Lord. Perhaps this prayer will be meaningful to you too.

**“For all things and in all things may God be blessed.
Lord, may Your holy will be done.”**

This prayer can turn things around in your life. We pray that *in all things* and, get this, for all things may God be blessed. Can we honestly pray that God be blessed for everything, good or bad, that happens to us? Likewise, can we also pray good prayers for the blessing of God *in* the good or bad? Can anything happen to us without God knowing it? Can circumstances sneak upon us without God's intervention? In theology classes for young ministers we emphasize that God knows all. We call this God's omniscience (all-knowing). Added to this we teach that God's all-knowing is good for us. How? I do not know, except that if God be God—and good as God—then He will see to it that our lives praise Him in our faithfulness to the truth of His faithfulness.

Sounding like something from the Lord's Prayer in Matthew 6, the second and last line of the prayer above is “Lord, may Your holy will be done.” Only God's will is adequate to the human condition. It alone has the power to bring human beings to fullness of grace rather than the pains of hell. One of the greatest saints, Francis of Assisi, regarded himself as a sinner constantly in need of God's redemptive love. He was not playing around. We are familiar with St. Paul's self-evaluation in his letter to Timothy when he said that he—Paul—was “the chief of sinners.” Francis and Paul are brothers in understanding God's loving will and the human need for it. We hunger and thirst for God and God's will to be done everywhere. We look for the day when His grace will cover the world and the beauty of salvation will flower everywhere.

Seeking Help

As you think of your growth in God's grace, it might help to take a fresh look at Mary. Sure, her place in the history of salvation was unique and can never be repeated. At the same time, her humanness helps us to approach God in prayer. If we have her willingness to do what God asks, then our prayers will take on a new meaning. Ask God

to help you learn from Mary just as you would like to learn from Paul. See what God does.

Use the two lines from Caussade for other prayer concerns you have. Study it. Ask the Spirit who prompted it to help you apply it to your life. When you feel depressed by evil, take your concerns and feelings to God, using this prayer of Caussade's. Come back to this prayer when life is easy and also when life is hard. Trust God to help you do what He wants from you to assist in the doing of God's will everywhere. List situations when things seem to go well and also when you seem to be tripped up and failing by illness, accident, or human violence. Use those situations as part of your daily prayers. God will help you to adopt the Spirit Caussade speaks about.

Each day let us remember that God is our great source. Caussade will be helpful to us only as far as he helps us to God. *It is not important that we learn about Caussade; it is very important that we learn about God.* Think of our use of Caussade as a pipe through which clean water flows from the treatment plant to our faucet. When you are hot and thirsty, you are grateful for a glass of cool water. You never think of the pipe used to get it to you. Think for a while on these things.

Holy Father, Giver of all good things, Source of all things that make for a good and meaningful life, hear our prayer. We never cease to praise you, Blessed Trinity, for Your love.

Thank you for providing us with human examples of faithful living. May Mary and Caussade continue to inspire Your Church and be a blessing in our lives. Help us to be bearers of the Good News that Jesus has come to bring us to Your kingdom. Until then, make us Your faithful servants

In His Name we ask these things, Amen.

*Jerry L. Mercer
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