

his servant Israel, in remembrance of his mercy (1:54). The prayer is rounded off by mention of the covenant promise God made “to Abraham and to his posterity [descendants] forever” (1:55). God will bypass those at the center of power in favor of the marginalized and the lowly.

For Reflection: In Mary’s prayer, the lowly are raised up. What does this mean in our day and age?



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The Magnificat and Discipleship

The Magnificat is not simply a beautiful religious hymn. It is a powerful challenge to the existing structures of power and oppression of its time. At the same time, Mary speaks as one whose experience of God as “Savior” is a model for the poor and oppressed of all ages. There is an invitation to readers in every generation to join Mary in her song, to make her experience of salvation their own.

The Magnificat is a prayer of “passionate conflict and vindication,” calling us all to walk together with people who are marginalized or oppressed in our society. Mary’s song is the “great New Testament canticle of liberation,” giving praise to God for promising to be present to the outcast and suffering, according to Daniel Casey in “Scripture from Scratch.”

We are called to share this pilgrimage of Mary’s

Magnificat. It is a journey of prophetic discipleship and witness. “Blessed rather are those who hear the word of God and keep it!” (Lk 11:28). Mary is indeed blessed for she has heard God’s word in her life and challenges us to do likewise.

For Reflection: When have you heard God’s word in your life? How did you respond?

Praying with The Magnificat

The Magnificat is an invitation for all of us to pray and praise God. When we pray the Magnificat we pray *with* Mary to God. Consider making the Magnificat part of your daily prayer practice. In this way, you will join the whole Church as it daily prays with Mary’s Magnificat at evening prayer (vespers).

If we pray the Magnificat, we must be willing to live the Magnificat. Mary’s vocation is our vocation. She teaches us courage and solidarity in our efforts to liberate strife. Mary lifts us beyond the small myopic horizon of our sighted vision to the abundant insight of her boundary-breaking son, Jesus. Mary’s prayer is a magnifying glass that both enlarges and focuses our love of her Son, Jesus.

Like Mary, we are called to rejoice and trust in God’s promises and be humble enough to let God create wonderful things out of our emptiness. This prayer keeps the needs of the poor before us. It challenges us to fill the hungry with “good things” and to “lift up the lowly.” Like Mary we are called to proclaim (to magnify) with our lives the greatness of God’s mercy and love. As St. Ambrose said in reference to this wonderful prayer, “Let Mary’s soul be in us to glorify the Lord; let her spirit be in us that we may rejoice in God our Savior.”



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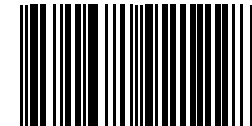
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MARY’S MAGNIFICENT PRAYER: The Magnificat



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As Catholics, we often pray the Hail Mary, a prayer addressed to Mary. However, there is another prayer that is addressed to God by Mary. It is known by its Latin name, *Magnificat*. This name is derived from the opening line of the Latin Vulgate's translation of the Bible, *Magnificat anima mea Dominum*, which means "my soul magnifies the Lord." Of the four times Mary speaks in the New Testament, only one, the *Magnificat*, is a prayer.

Pope Francis has said of the *Magnificat*: "It is the song of hope; it is the song of the People of God walking through history. It is the song of many saints, men and women, some famous, and very many others unknown to us but known to God: mums, dads, catechists, missionaries, priests, sisters, young people, even children and grandparents" (Homily, August 15, 2013).

Jewish Roots of the Magnificat

The Old Testament model for the *Magnificat* is the Song of Hannah in 1 Samuel 2:1-10. Hannah is the childless wife of Elkanah. She prays for a child and promises to dedicate him to the Lord. Her vow is accepted; she bears a child whom she names Samuel and brings him to the sanctuary at Shiloh. Hannah's song gives thanks and praise to God for answering her prayer and for taking the side of the feeble, hungry, and barren. She goes on to describe how God acts: "He raises up the poor from



the dust" (2:8), and ends with a glimpse of the future king or Messiah: "He [the Lord] will give strength to his king and exalt the power of his anointed" (2:10). Mary's *Magnificat* echoes the words and thoughts of Hannah's song. Hannah's prayer speaks of the reversal of fortunes between the mighty and the powerless, the full and the hungry, the barren and the fertile — so does Mary's *Magnificat* prayer.

For Reflection: How does the *Magnificat* inspire us to live our faith?

Mary's God-Centered Prayer

Prayer has been described as the raising of the heart and mind to God. It has also been described as centering oneself on God. Mary's prayer is a good example, for it is both addressed to and centered on God.

Mary's soul magnifies the Lord and her spirit rejoices in "God my Savior." Mary *magnifies* God her Savior, which means to celebrate the greatness and be in praise of someone wonderful. She is praising God with her whole being in this part of the prayer.

After declaring this about God, Mary gives the reason for her joy. In becoming the mother of the messiah, God has exalted her so that all generations might call her blessed.

For he [God] has regarded the low estate of his handmaiden.

For behold, henceforth all generations will call me blessed;

for he who is mighty has done great things for me, and holy is his name" (Lk 1:48-49).

Mary also refers to God as "he who is mighty" and who is holy, meaning not only that God is all powerful, but that there is no one like God.

Then Mary, the poor, pregnant, peasant woman, speaks of God's mercy: "His mercy is on those who fear him." The phrase "on those who fear him" is better translated "for those who hold God in awe." "Fear" here does not mean terror or fright but a



sense of profound awe, humble trust, and steadfast confidence. Mary is awestruck by God's mercy. As a Jew, she knew that the very definition of God is mercy: "The LORD, the LORD, a God merciful and gracious, slow to anger, and abounding in steadfast love and faithfulness" (Ex 34:6).

For Reflection: How do you, like Mary, center your prayer on God?

God's Lowly Servant

Mary sees her situation as typical of how God deals with humankind — that is, God raises up the lowly and puts down the powerful. In the Lectionary reading, Mary calls herself God's "lowly servant" and in this way identifies herself with the poor ones of the Old Testament (in Hebrew they are called the *anawim*). These are people who are often oppressed but do not lose faith in God. Thus, for Mary, God "has brought down the powerful from their thrones, and lifted up the lowly" (Lk 1:52, Lectionary). Mary believes God "has filled the hungry with good things, and the rich he has sent away empty" (1:53). Finally, she interprets the mercy shown to her as typical of how God deals with Israel as God's covenant people. "He has helped

Mary's Song of Praise: The Magnificat

My soul magnifies the Lord,
and my spirit rejoices in God my Savior,
for he has regarded the low estate of his handmaiden.
For behold, henceforth all generations
will call me blessed;
for he who is mighty has done great things for me,
and holy is his name.
And his mercy is on those who fear him
from generation to generation.
He has shown strength with his arm,
he has scattered the proud in the imagination
of their hearts,
he has put down the mighty from their thrones,
and exalted those of low degree;
he has filled the hungry with good things,
and the rich he has sent empty away.
He has helped his servant Israel,
in remembrance of his mercy,
as he spoke to our fathers,
to Abraham and to his posterity for ever.
(LUKE 1:46-55)



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