

My Soul Magnifies the Lord

A Scriptural Journey with Mary

Jeanne Kun

the **WORD**[®]
among us

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Introduction



Live as the Blessed Virgin lived: loving God only, desiring God only, trying to please God only in all that we do.” This was the wise advice given by St. John Vianney to his parishioners in the French village of Ars more than a century ago, and it is still applicable for us today. *My Soul Magnifies the Lord: A Scriptural Journey with Mary* provides readers with the opportunity to examine the life of the Blessed Virgin Mary and come to know her in a deeper way. As we accompany Mary on her pilgrimage of faith, we learn about the woman who magnified the Lord in such a profound way. And from Mary, who bore the Word made flesh, we learn how to follow her son, Jesus.

Since God chose this young Jewish woman to enter into his work of redemption, we are often tempted to think of Mary as so perfect that she is beyond emulation. We may envision her as a beautifully crafted statue atop a tall pedestal or a stately queen enthroned in the heights of heaven. Yet, while Mary was privileged to be chosen by God and filled with grace to prepare her for her unique role, she was nonetheless an ordinary young woman of Israel.

Perhaps barely more than a girl when the angel Gabriel brought God’s bewildering request to her, Mary must have been greatly challenged to believe God and the mysteries he was asking her to participate in. Without hesitation, however, she gave her assent. As the mother of Jesus, the Incarnate Son of God,

Mary caught him in her arms when he took his first faltering steps, witnessed his first miracle at Cana, and wept as he died on the cross.

The New Testament does not provide a physical description of Mary (nor, for that matter, of Jesus). In all likelihood, she had the distinguishing features and other physical traits—complexion and color of hair—of any woman of her times of Semitic descent, but we know no more about her appearance than we know about her son’s. Surely, though, there was a close family resemblance between them, since Mary was Jesus’ biological mother.

The Gospels are also silent about Mary’s birth and death. None of the evangelists wrote a biography of Mary, and none gave us the kind of vital statistics and curriculum vitae that would be found in the latest edition of *Who’s Who*. We will be disappointed if we are looking for such particulars about Mary as we read the New Testament.

However, the few scenes painted by Matthew, Mark, Luke, and John in which Mary played a role portray all that is essential in order for us to know her. These events—the “Marian moments” of the Bible—depict an accurate portrait of her heart and character and also clearly tell us who Mary is: woman of faith; Virgin Mother of the Lord; intercessor; Mother of the church.

Where did the evangelists receive the information about Mary and about Jesus’ infancy? We can assume that, in the earliest days

of the church, Mary “passed on to the disciples her memories of the Incarnation, the infancy, the hidden life and the mission of her divine Son as a priceless treasure, thus helping to make him known and to strengthen the faith of believers” (Pope John Paul II, General audience of May 28, 1997). In revealing her knowledge and memories about her son, Mary also revealed much about herself.

Through the centuries, tradition and the teaching authority of the Catholic Church have given us much to treasure about Mary by deepening our understanding of biblical truths. In A.D. 431, at the Council of Ephesus, the church accorded to Mary the title “Mother of God” (*Catechism of the Catholic Church*, 466). The early church also affirmed its faith in Mary’s perpetual virginity (CCC, 499). The church’s recognition that Mary, “full of grace,” was redeemed from the moment of her conception culminated in the dogma of the Immaculate Conception, defined in 1854 (CCC, 491). In 1950, the church defined the dogma of the Assumption of Mary. Since Mary had been preserved from sin, she was also preserved from physical decay, the punishment for sin. And so our pilgrimage with the Blessed Virgin ends in the glorious hope of our own bodily resurrection (CCC, 966).

How to Use This Book

In *My Soul Magnifies the Lord: A Scriptural Journey with Mary*, we accompany Mary through the crucial events of her life, and she


accompanies us on our pilgrimage of faith. Each chapter focuses on a “scene” from her life as recorded in the New Testament. As you begin each reflection, carefully read the Scripture narrative—provided in this book in the Revised Standard Version—and meditate on it. Also read the accompanying section “Reflecting on the Word” to deepen your understanding of the text.

Two sets of questions are included in each chapter to help you explore the full scope of the passage and consider its relevance to your own life. Those under the heading “Pondering the Word” require an attentive reading of the Scripture selection and focus on the content and meaning of the text. “Living the Word” questions prompt you to apply the lessons and truths learned through Scripture to your own life.

“Rooted in the Word” offers brief comments on various attributes of Mary as well as of others in the Bible—among them Ruth, Hannah, and Abraham—that are modeled in the corresponding scene. Additional Scripture texts further illustrate the virtue or character trait highlighted in this section. A selection from a Catholic writer—ancient or modern—concludes each chapter. These excerpts, under the heading “Treasuring the Word,” are indeed treasures from the church’s rich Marian heritage.

The format of *My Soul Magnifies the Lord* is suited to personal reflection and individual study as well as group discussion. In either





case, begin each session with prayer, asking God to speak to you through his word. Although each chapter's Scripture scene is provided in full in this book, you may find it helpful to have a Bible on hand for looking up other passages and cross-references.

Whether you use this book for personal study or as an aid in your prayer time, read at your own pace, taking the time to meditate on the material and pursue any thoughts it brings to mind. You will gain the most benefit from your study by writing your answers to the questions in the space provided. End your reading or study with a prayer of thanksgiving to God for what you have learned and ask the Holy Spirit how to apply it to your life.

If you use this book in a Bible study group, it is especially important that each member take the time to prepare well for each session. Read the material decided upon in advance and consider your answers to the questions so the group can have a rewarding discussion in

the time allotted. Actively contribute to the discussion, but also listen attentively to the others in the group. Respect each member of the group and their contribution to the discussion. The group might also want to designate a leader or moderator to facilitate the discussion and to include a time of prayer together during the meeting.

As you progress through the events of Mary's life, we pray that you too will be filled with the grace that God so lavishly poured upon his mother. On that day when Mary told her cousin Elizabeth about the great miracle that had come to pass within her, she proclaimed that her soul magnified the Lord (Luke 1:46). As we grow closer to Jesus through his mother, may our own souls reflect the Lord and the glory he has in store for all of us.

Jeanne Kun
The Word Among Us

The Annunciation



Behold, I am the
handmaid of the Lord; let it
be to me according to your
word.

Luke 1:38

Our Lady was full of God
because she lived for God
alone, yet she thought of
herself only as the
handmaid of the Lord. Let
us do the same.

Blessed Mother Teresa of
Calcutta, *Jesus, the Word to Be
Spoken*

Advent Overture

Might Gabriel have gasped in wonder
at the task entrusted him:
To be herald
of God's generosity and deed
that would clothe all majesty in humility?

Did he quail
to bring such request from eternal divinity
to an earthly child's mortality?

Did he hesitate
at the sight of the fragile virginity before him,
fearing whether this frail womb could bear God's weight
and contain infinity within its walls?

Then resolutely
Gabriel's greeting broke upon Mary,
plowing furrows
in the fertile silence of her soul
so God's word might be planted there
like seed in a readied field.

Did the angel tremble then
while waiting this child's answer,
anxious that she not refuse?

And then she gave consent.



The seed was sown,
the Word conceived.
God found home upon the earth
and would receive a mother's warm embrace.

Perhaps Gabriel sighed in relief with task accomplished
and the angel-hosts of heaven sang their joy at her reply
(and already hide their faces in reverence at his flesh
soon to lie naked against the raw wood of the manger and the cross).

Then silence folded in again
around the virgin child
as Gabriel took leave of her.
But she was not alone,
for with her *fiat* Mary's heart
had begun to beat in unison (and full accord)
with the One now growing in her womb. ☪



Luke 1:26-38 *The Scene*

^{1:26} In the sixth month the angel Gabriel was sent from God to a city of Galilee named Nazareth, ²⁷ to a virgin betrothed to a man whose name was Joseph, of the house of David; and the virgin's name was Mary. ²⁸ And he came to her and said, "Hail, full of grace, the Lord is with you!" ²⁹ But she was greatly troubled at the saying, and considered in her mind what sort of greeting this might be. ³⁰ And the angel said to her, "Do not be afraid, Mary, for you have found favor with God. ³¹ And behold, you will conceive in your womb and bear a son, and you shall call his name Jesus.

³² He will be great, and will be called the Son of the Most High; and the Lord God will give to him the throne of his father David, ³³ and he will reign over the house of

Jacob for ever;
and of his kingdom there will be no end."

³⁴ And Mary said to the angel, "How can this be, since I have no husband?" ³⁵ And the angel said to her,

"The Holy Spirit will come upon you,
and the power of the Most High
will overshadow you;
therefore the child to be born will be
called holy,
the Son of God.

³⁶ And behold, your kinswoman Elizabeth in her old age has also conceived a son; and this is the sixth month with her who was called barren. ³⁷ For with God nothing will be impossible." ³⁸ And Mary said, "Behold, I am the handmaid of the Lord; let it be to me according to your word." And the angel departed from her.



Reflecting on the Word

Since the beginning, God has spoken with the men and women whom he created. First, he revealed himself to Adam and Eve so that they might know him and enjoy fellowship with him—a relationship so movingly described as “God walking in the garden in the cool of the day” amid his creation (Genesis 3:8). Thus, the story of Adam and Eve’s fall is a wrenching illustration of the sin that separates the human race from its creator. Yet, when our first parents were disobedient, God did not stop speaking to them, nor did he let his plan for his creation be thwarted. Even as Adam and Eve tried to excuse their fault (3:12-13), God spoke his first words of promise to reverse the consequences of sin and to triumph over Satan, giving a hint of hope of the redemption to come: Eve’s offspring would crush the serpent (3:15).

After the fall, humankind began its long wait for a savior. Through the centuries, God continued his conversation with his chosen people as he spoke to the patriarchs and prophets of Israel, repeatedly renewing his promise. Finally the long-awaited time is at hand: God enters into conversation once again, this time with Mary of Nazareth. Out of this unique conversation, the Word becomes flesh.

The angel Gabriel’s words to Mary, “Hail, full of grace” (Luke 1:28), announce a radical new turn in God’s dialogue with humankind. God singles out a young Jewish woman and, through Gabriel, makes a mo-

mentous request of her: to bear the “Son of the Most High” (1:31-32). Mary’s question, “How can this be, since I have no husband?” (1:34), is not a skeptic’s demand for proof that ends any further discussion; rather, with her inquiry, she enters more deeply into the conversation, expressing a willingness to grasp something holy and mysterious.

In answer, Gabriel offers Mary no physiological explanation because Jesus is to be conceived in a way that surpasses nature. Instead, he assures her that nothing is impossible for God (Luke 1:37): It is the Holy Spirit who will overshadow and empower her (1:35). Thus, in conceiving and bearing the Son of God, Mary will remain a virgin. This “overshadowing” is the same presence and glory of God that rested on the “dwelling” or “tabernacle”—the portable tent-sanctuary that the Israelites carried with them to house the Ark of the Covenant as they journeyed through the wilderness (Exodus 40:34-35).

Mary must have been in awe as she heard Gabriel describe the child to be so wondrously conceived in her. He is to be named Jesus (Luke 1:31), meaning “The Lord saves.” This child whom Mary is asked to bear would be the promised heir of Israel’s greatest king, David: “The Lord God will give to him the throne of his father David, and he will reign over the house of Jacob for ever; and of his kingdom there will be no end” (1:32-33).

In these few moments, Mary’s future has been unveiled for her. God has, amazingly,



asked her to be the mother of Israel's Messiah! St. Bernard of Clairvaux eloquently captures the sense of anticipation as Gabriel awaited Mary's response in his *Homilies in Praise of the Blessed Virgin Mary*:

Say the word and receive the Word: give yours and conceive God's. Breathe one fleeting word and embrace the everlasting Word. . . . Blessed Virgin, open your heart to faith, your lips to consent and your womb to your Creator. Behold, the long-desired of all nations is standing at the door and knocking. (*Homily IV, 8*)

Although she understands little of what this would mean for her, Mary gives her wholehearted and unreserved assent: "Behold, I am the handmaid of the Lord; let it be to me according to your word" (Luke 1:38).

Mary's consent is not cheap or ill-considered. She was a young woman of Israel, steeped in a knowledge of the prophetic promises God had made to his people and full of eager longing to see them fulfilled. She held God's word and his promises in reverence and based her life on them. So, though she is bewildered and unsure of all the implications of the angel's message, her yes to God rises out of faith in him and in his wisdom and goodness. She takes God at his

word and trusts him totally to fulfill it in her and to care for her as she gives herself over to it. She has an unerring conviction that God will honor and meet her consent with grace, help, and protection, supplying her with all she needs to carry it out.

Nor is Mary's *fiat* a "one-time only" consent—it will be repeated over and over in the days and years ahead. It initially opens her to be the recipient of the Word making a home in her. Mary will literally bear the Word of God in the flesh; then she will be borne up by him. Her steady pondering of the word and her constant affirmation of it, repeatedly assenting to God's purposes, will carry her forward in unwavering faith and obedience.

Two thousand years after Mary said yes to God in Nazareth, her example still offers us strength to follow God's will in our own lives. As we stood on the threshold of this new millennium, Pope John Paul II wrote of her:

Mary, who conceived the Incarnate Word by the power of the Holy Spirit and then in the whole of her life allowed herself to be guided by his interior activity, will be contemplated and imitated . . . above all as the woman who was docile to the voice of the Spirit, a woman of silence and attentiveness, a woman of hope. (*Tertio Millennio Adveniente, 48*)



Pondering the Word

1. Gabriel called Mary “full of grace” (Luke 1:28) and told her that she had “found favor with God” (1:30). The original Greek word *kecharitomene* (translated here as “favor”) is related to “grace,” indicating that Mary was “graced” by God. What do Gabriel’s words imply about the way God prepared Mary for her role as the Mother of God?

2. How did Gabriel describe the child Mary was to bear (Luke 1:31-33, 35)? What might Mary have understood by the titles the angel applied to this child? Read 2 Samuel 7:12-16, Isaiah 9:6-7, and Psalm 89:26-29 to expand your understanding.



3. Note the words and actions of Mary in this scene that indicate how she felt about the angel's greeting and his announcement. What do they reveal about her character? What changes in her emotions and responses do you think she expressed as the conversation with Gabriel progressed?

4. What does Mary's question, "How can this be?" (Luke 1:34), suggest to you about the interplay between faith that seeks for understanding and doubt or unbelief? In what sort of tone or attitude do you think she posed her question?



Living the Word

1. When have you felt that God was asking the unimaginable of you? How did you respond to him? What kind of questions or doubts did you raise before God? How can Mary's example help you trust God and his intentions for you?

2. What sorts of "signs" has God given you to strengthen your faith, confirm his word to you, or reassure you of his care? How did you respond to these signs? Can you recall any situation in your life, or in the life of someone you know, where you would say God did the "impossible" (Luke 1:37)? What effect did this have on your faith?



3. Have you ever experienced something surprisingly new and fresh coming to birth in your circumstances once you said yes to God? How different was this from your own expectations and plans?

4. Mary received God's word through the angelic messenger and carried the Word-made-flesh within her. In what ways does God's word come to you? How have you let it "make a home" in you?





Mary: A Portrait of Trusting Obedience

Mary's assent to God's request is a model to us in many ways: a model for responding to the will of the Father in our lives; for personally welcoming and receiving Jesus; for being open to the action of the Holy Spirit; and for embracing the word of God and allowing it to be implanted in us to grow and bear fruit.

When Mary gave her consent to bear Jesus, the Word was made flesh—literally—from her human substance. Physically, Jesus had her genes. In appearance, perhaps he even “had his mother’s eyes” and the same hair color and complexion as hers. Years later, when Jesus declared, “My mother and my brethren are those who hear the word of God and do it” (Luke 8:21), he was not repudiating his family ties or criticizing his mother. Rather, he was commending Mary not only as his mother according to the flesh, but as one who had indeed done the will of God. By pointing to Mary’s obedience and trust, Jesus was making it clear that her fundamental relationship with him was not through her physical connection to him but through hearing and acting on the word of God. As St. Augustine expressed it, Mary is more blessed “not because in her womb the Word was made flesh and dwelt among us, but because she kept God’s very Word,

through whom she was made, and who was made flesh in her” (*Tractate X on the Gospel of John*, 3).

None of us can be united with Jesus in the way that Mary was as his biological mother. But each of us can, like her, embrace him through faith and trust. Through our obedience to his word, we, too, can be closely and intimately united to Jesus as members of his family.

Read and prayerfully reflect on these additional Scripture passages that portray examples of acting in trusting obedience to God:

Sacrifice and offering thou dost not
desire;
but thou hast given me an open ear.
Burnt offering and sin offering thou
hast not required.
Then I said, “Lo, I come;
in the roll of the book it is written
of me;
I delight to do thy will, O my God.”
(Psalm 40:6-8)

[Jesus] fell on his face and prayed, “My Father, if it be possible, let this cup pass from me; nevertheless, not as I will, but as thou wilt.” (Matthew 26:39)

Have this mind among yourselves, which was in Christ Jesus, who, though he was in the form of God, did not count equality with God a thing to be grasped, but emptied himself, taking the form of a servant, being born in the likeness of men. And being found in human form he humbled himself and became obedient unto death, even death on a cross. (Philippians 2:5-8)

By faith Abraham obeyed when he was called to go out to a place which he was to receive as an inheritance; and he went out, not knowing where he was to go. By faith he sojourned in the land of promise, as in a foreign land, living in tents with Isaac and Jacob, heirs with him of the same promise. For he looked forward to the city which has foundations, whose builder and maker is God. (Hebrews 11:8-10)



Rebekah: Another Portrait of Trusting Obedience

Read Genesis 24

The Old Testament's story of Rebekah resembles the Annunciation scene in several ways. In Luke's account, God sent Gabriel, his servant, to Mary to gain her consent to bear his Son. In Genesis, Abraham sent his servant to find a wife for his son Isaac. In both instances, the consent of the woman allowed God's plan of salvation to further unfold.

Rebekah went willingly with Abraham's servant to her future husband (Genesis 24:58).

Like Mary, she made a free choice, trusting God in what she recognized as his invitation and purpose for her life. As Isaac's wife, Rebekah became the mother of Jacob and the grandmother of Judah—from whose tribe the Messiah was descended. Through their trust and obedience, both Rebekah and Mary became key links in Christ's genealogy.

We see the mystery of God's action in Rebekah and Mary: Each gave her consent freely, yet it was given in response to God's grace. We, too, can rely on God for the grace that prepares us to embrace his will.

Treasuring the Word

A Reading from *The Reed of God* by Caryl Houselander

Fiat

To what was [Mary] asked to consent?

First of all, to the descent of the Holy Spirit, to surrender her littleness to the Infinite Love, and as a result to become the Mother of Christ.

It was so tremendous, yet so passive.

She was not asked to do anything herself, but to let something be done to her.

She was not asked to lead a special kind of life, to retire to the temple and live as a nun, to cultivate suitable virtues or claim special privileges.

She was simply to remain in the world, to go forward with her marriage to Joseph, to live the life of an artisan's wife, just what she had planned to do when she had no idea that anything out of the ordinary would ever happen to her.

It almost seemed as if God's becoming man and being born of a woman *were* ordinary. . . .

Outwardly [Mary's daily life] would not differ from the life she would have led if she had not been chosen to be the Bride of the Spirit and the Mother of God at all!

She was not even asked to live it alone with this God who was her own Being and whose Being was to be hers.

No, He asked for her ordinary life shared with Joseph. She was not to neglect her simple human tenderness, her love for an earthly man, because God was her unborn child.

On the contrary, the hands and feet, the heart, the waking, sleeping and eating that were forming Christ were to form Him in service to Joseph.

Yes, it certainly seemed that God wanted to give the world the impression that it is ordinary for Him to be born of a human creature.



Well, that is a fact. God did mean it to be the ordinary thing, for it is His will that Christ shall be born in every human being's life and not, as a rule, through extraordinary things, but through the ordinary daily life and the human love that people give to one another.

Our Lady said yes.

She said yes for us all. . . .

Our Lady said yes for the human race. Each one of us must echo that yes for our own lives.

We are all asked if we will surrender what we are, our humanity, our flesh and blood, to the Holy Spirit and allow Christ to fill the emptiness formed by the particular shape of our life.

The surrender that is asked of us includes complete and absolute trust; it must be like Our Lady's surrender, without condition and without reservation. . . .

What we shall be asked to give is our flesh and blood, our daily life—our thoughts, our service to one another, our affections and loves, our words, our intellect, our waking, working and sleeping, our ordinary human joys and sorrows—to God.

To surrender all that we are, as we are, to the Spirit of Love in order that our lives may bear Christ into the world—that is what we shall be asked.

Our Lady has made this possible. Her *fiat* was for herself and for us, but if we want God's will to be completed in us as it is in her, we must echo her *fiat*.

