

Mater

People have said that after one graduates from college it is time to move on from Mater. The picture of a young Mary in a pink dress is fine for students, but we must move on. Even Pauline Perdrau in her mature years painted a different Mater; she portrayed Mary as an older woman. However, I suggest that this is not necessary. I suggest that if we really study Mater we will find in her the attitudes necessary to live our whole lives in response to the call of God. Good portrait artists are known for capturing the essence of a person in their pictures. They capture something, which helps us to understand their subjects. I think that in Mater, Pauline Perdrau has done just that. I believe that studying the portrait of Mater can reveal to us who Mary is, and what her life is all about.

Look at Mater. What do you see? What characterizes her? Note the inwardness, the attitude of contemplation, the openness, the self-possession. Reverend Mother deLescure called her the mother of the invisible and the essential.

Looking at the picture, one would not be surprised to see the angel Gabriel appear. Hear the greeting: “Hail full of grace! The Lord is with you. Blessed are you among women. You will conceive in your womb and bear a son, and you shall name him Jesus”.

Full of grace! That is what Mary is – full of God’s presence. There is no sin in her blocking that presence. Mary is attuned to God and ponders his word in her heart. Therefore, she can discern what God calls her to do.

Yet this inwardness, this contemplation leads to great action. The love of God urges us. And Mary sets out, led by the Spirit, to visit her cousin Elizabeth who, according to the angel, is in her sixth month of pregnancy.

Let us now imagine another picture of Mary. See her walking along the roads of Nazareth on her way to Judah. Mary strides down the dusty roads with the vigor of a young person who is accustomed to travel by foot. She wears the peasant garb of the poor, as do ninety per cent of the people of Israel. She is a woman, and women count for nothing in this society. See a rich merchant ride by on his horse, forcing her off the road, and enveloping her in clouds of dust. Such a woman was marginalized by the society of her time. What was Mary's response to this treatment? Did she internalize the values of her society and consider herself worthless? We cannot tell from this picture; Mary just trudges on.

However, let us look at another scene. Picture Mary arriving at the home of her cousin and greeting Elizabeth. Look at the two women embracing each other: Elizabeth, old grey, in her late stages of pregnancy, Mary, young, vital, her arm around Elizabeth. Listen to the conversation. Elizabeth cries out: "Blessed are you among women and blessed is the fruit of your womb. How does this happen to me that the mother of my lord should come to me? For at the moment the sound of your greeting reached my ears, the infant in my womb leapt for joy. Blessed are you who believed that what was spoken to you by the Lord would be fulfilled". And Mary responded: "My soul proclaims the greatness of the Lord and my spirit rejoices in God my savior. For he has looked upon his handmaid's lowliness for behold from now on all ages will call me blessed. The mighty one has done great things for me and holy in his name."

What supreme self-confidence! What great self esteem and yet what great humility. Mary recognizes the gift and grace of God, and rejoices in it. This marginalized Miriam of Nazareth understands her dignity and

recognizes that it is a gift of God. Her grace and contemplative attitude enable her to discern and recognize the action of God in her life. We can see operative in this scene of the visitation those key characteristics which were captured in the Mater portrait: the inwardness, the attitude of contemplation, the openness, the self – possession.

Let us look at one final scene, the crucifixion. See Golgotha where they crucified Jesus. And with him were two others -one on either side, with Jesus in the middle. Standing by the cross of Jesus were his mother, and his mother's sister Mary the wife of Clopas, and Mary of Magdala. Look at Mary! She stands at the foot of the cross. She does not faint; she does not collapse. And in her face is both extreme agony and graced filled faith. This scene conjures up all the anguish and desolation a women could experience who had born a child, and raised that child only to have him crucified by the power of the state. Nonetheless, we see in this scene the same trust, the same faith that we glimpsed in the Mater portrait. However, now we see it in its maturity, its fulfillment. Mary stands supported by the presence of God, the grace of God. Mary remains open and accepting of the sometimes hard grace of God.

Look again and again at Mater, see who she is. Follow her life journey. For the life of the historical Miriam of Nazareth was indeed a journey of faith with significance for our lives as we struggle with our challenges today. She walked her path keeping faith with her loving God. She remained open to God's presence, listening to him, speaking to him, attending to Him. She believed and pondered his words. Then at the Resurrection, the God of Israel fulfilled the ancient promise made to her people. Mary leaves us a legacy of faith and hope in the living God. For each of us also, a moment comes when we are invited to trace out the life of

Christ in our own lives and to live more fully the call we have received. It comes when our marriages are troubled and when our children are ill; when failure seems imminent and the shadow of death draws near. At those moments we can learn from Mary how to respond to this call of God. As we study the picture of Mater let us reflect on Mary's relationship with God and connect her story with our own journey. This will show us a way to go forward and give us the courage to live our lives. If we live as she did, open to the presence and grace of God we too will be bearers of Christ bringing the kingdom of justice and peace to our world. Mater Admirabilis, pray for us.