

Mary: A Model of Integrity

By Bishop Victor Galeone

The following text is from a homily preached by Bishop Victor Galeone at the Red Mass in Tallahassee - March 25, 2003.

When my brother bishops invited me to preach the homily at the Red Mass this year, I was unaware that today would be the feast of our Lady's Annunciation. When that detail surfaced, I felt stymied. You see, in the Catholic tradition, Scripture readings for major feasts may not be altered. What lesson, then, could I possibly glean from the humble maid of Nazareth that would be applicable to lawmakers and attorneys of the twenty first century?

After some prayer and reflection, I came to realize that Mary epitomizes a virtue that is woefully lacking in our advanced technological age - integrity. So I invite you to come back with me in spirit to that touching scene described in today's Gospel.

It's here that we first encounter Mary of Nazareth. She's alone. We learn that she is soon to be married to Joseph, a descendent of the royal line of David. A heavenly visitor interrupts her solitude. He informs her that she will soon bear a son. He goes on to describe this child of hers in terms that every devout Jew would immediately recognize as referring to the long-awaited Messiah.

But Mary has a problem. "How can that happen," she asks, "since I don't know man?" To know man is a biblical euphemism for having sexual relations. Just what is Mary's problem? After all, she is engaged to Joseph, and Gabriel did use the future tense, "You will have a son." So where's the problem? Surely, she and Joseph planned to consummate the marriage on their wedding night, didn't they - or did they?

Let's say that you offer me a cocktail at a party and I reply, "No thanks, I don't drink." Does that mean, just for the present moment? Doesn't Mary's answer, "I don't know man," fall into the same category? Was she ever planning to have marital relations? The early Church Fathers see in Mary's reply a suggestion that she and Joseph must have made a vow to God to live as brother and sister after the wedding. As unlikely as that might seem for the Jews of that period, the Dead Sea scrolls have disclosed that around the time of Christ some members of the Qumran community did in fact take a vow of celibacy.

But, Mary, why would you have done something so foolish? Don't you realize that Joseph has David's royal blood in his veins? Surely you must know that all the clans of Judah have been eliminated except for David's. Joseph could well be among the finalists. Don't you dream, like every Jewish maiden, of becoming the mother of the Messiah? And even granted that you made such a vow, didn't you hear what Gabriel just said about the child? "The Lord God will give him the throne of his father David. He will rule over the house of Jacob forever, and his kingdom will never end."

Mary replies, "Yes, I heard what the angels said. But I also know what God says in his word, 'Fulfill your vows to the Most High.' I've given God my word; I cannot take it back."

It is only when the angel explains to Mary that her vow is secure - that her child will be conceived, not through Joseph, but through the power of the Holy Spirit - that Mary gives her consent. "Here I am, the handmaid of the Lord. Let it all take place, just as you said." Mary - a marvelous model of integrity!

Against the backdrop of this Gospel scene, I would like to place two cameos for us to consider.

The first cameo took place some 30 years ago. It concerns Jim Mann, an attorney who was also a permanent deacon at the parish where I was pastor some ten years ago. In a sermon he preached one

Sunday, he related a moving, personal experience. To this day, I can still recall Jim's account of this incident.

It seems that after a marriage encounter weekend in the mid-70's, Jim and his wife Joyce began to experience a deeper relationship with the Lord. Jim became convinced that they had to allow Jesus to be Lord of every areas of their lives, including family planning and his work as an attorney.

Now it happened that the previous year, Jim had become a junior partner I a law firm, and things were going extremely well. But he began to notice that bills mailed to clients for his work were showing about one-third more in hours spent than he had submitted on the time sheets. He checked with the secretary, who informed him this was per the instructions of the senior partner. When Jim approached him, his partner admitted that, yes, it was the firm's policy to mark up the hours by one third. Jim explained that he had a serious problem with stating that something had taken him 15 hours to do, when in reality it had taken only ten. The partner replied, "Jim, I do understand your concern. But this is my firm, and this is the way it will continue to be done."

After prayer and discussion with his wife, Jim realized he would have to leave the firm. In his own words: "I knew I could continue to grow in my relationship with the Lord, or I could continue to advance my career in that firm, but I could not do both. So I submitted my resignation."

Jim concluded by saying that it was a difficult decision in one sense, because he had about 20 cases of his own to take with him, and Joyce was expecting their fourth child at the time. But in another sense, the decision was easy, because it was very clear that they were doing the right thing, and the Lord would provide for all their needs. And he has.

Enron and World.com would not be household words today if their executives had been men of integrity - men like my good friend, Jim Mann.

The second cameo concerns another attorney, Sir Thomas More, Lord Chancellor of England, the second in command after Henry VIII. In the introduction of his masterful play, *A Man for All Seasons*, Robert Bolt poses the question, "Why would I choose to make the hero of my play a man who brings about his own death for refusing to place his hand on an old black book and tell an ordinary lie?"

Towards the end of the play, Bolt captures the drama of Thomas More's dilemma. More has been imprisoned in the Tower of London for nearly a year for refusing to swear to the Act of Succession. In the present scene, the authorities have permitted his wife Alice, his daughter Margaret, and his son-in-law Roper a brief visit.

ROPER: Sir Thomas, Meg is under oath to persuade you to sign the Act.

MORE: That was silly, Meg. How did you come to do that?

MEG: I wanted do!

MORE: You want me to swear to the Act of Succession?

MEG: "God regards more the thoughts of the heart than the words of the mouth," or so you've always told me.

MORE: Yes.

MEG: Then say the words of the oath but in your heart think otherwise.

MORE: Why, Meg, what is an oath but words we say to God?

MEG: That's very neat.

MORE: Do you mean it isn't true?

MEG: No it's true.

MORE: Then it's a poor argument to call it "neat." When a man takes an oath, Meg, he's holding his own self in if own hands. Like water (cups hands) and if he opens his fingers then - he needn't hope to find himself again. Some men aren't capable of this, but I'd be loathe to think your father one of them.

Within in a few months, More was tried for high treason and convicted. For 30 days his head, mounted on a pike, stared down on those making their way across London Bridge.

In 1831 a visitor from France came to our shores, where he spent nine months, visiting our cities, our factories, and our farms. He wanted to learn the secret of America's greatness. His name was Alexis de Toqueville. He summarized his findings in these memorable words: "America is great because America is good. And when America ceases to be good, America will cease to be great."

It's quite obvious that by "good" de Toqueville was referring to moral goodness, that is, to our integrity. This evening, I would like to ask the question: If de Toqueville was to revisit our shores today, would he still find a nation of integrity?

In a nation of integrity, would there be critics who judge the cross of Christ in a jar of urine to be a work of art, while labeling the Ten Commandments on a Courthouse wall, an obscenity?

In a nation of integrity, would a Golden Globe Award be granted to a star rap singer, charged with 12 counts of molestation?

In a nation of integrity, would we pass a federal law prohibiting anyone from crushing the egg of a sea turtle, while legally permitting a surgeon to crush the head of a partially born infant?

In a nation of integrity, would we insist on parental consent for a school nurse to dispense aspirin to a minor, while forbidding parental notification, if that same minor chooses to have an abortion?

In a nation of integrity, would corporate executives award themselves millions of dollars in bonuses, while encouraging their unsuspecting employees to invest their modest savings in the company's worthless stock?

In a nation of integrity, would members of the cloth - yes, tragically, some Catholic priests - vow publicly to live lives of holiness, and then go to satisfy their lust on innocent children?

And finally, in a nation of integrity, would we condemn - and rightly so - the deliberate targeting of innocent civilians to advance one's cause as occurred on 9/11, and yet fail to recall our own role in the attacks on Hiroshima and Nagasaki?

I conclude with a challenge: Being a person of integrity does not come without a cost. It comes at a great price. It cost Our Lady excruciating sorrow on Calvary. It cost Jim Mann his position. And it cost Thomas More his life.

Still, let us not hesitate to emulate the integrity of the Jim Mann's, The Thomas More's and the humble maid of Nazareth in our lives. Yes! Let us emulate them - so that America may once again grow in goodness - and through the goodness, continue to be great.