



- Picture of St. Mary sitting on her throne

Awake, O my harp, your chords,
in praise of the Virgin Mary!
Lift up your voice and sing
the wonderful history of this Virgin,
The daughter of David,
who gave birth to the Life of the
world!

-St. Ephraim the Syrian

Introduction

During my youth in an ever growing and expanding church in Shoubra, it was counted an honor to have service requested of any individual. So much so, that a reply of consent to such an honorable request was often deemed redundant. To have been asked to serve God in any capacity was considered the ultimate, golden standard of honors, not a deed to be performed as "should I or shouldn't I do it?", "an extra work" that could possibly be scheduled in, a task to hurriedly be completed without giving priority to God through one's best efforts; nor did it fall behind in importance to work, social activities, collegiate aspirations, computers and TV programming, and fun times with friends and family gatherings. Rather, Service came as a guaranteed, readily understood, accepted—as—first-place in the life of those who were asked to serve. Service was viewed with anticipation and quiet humbleness, and

fore mostly considered and counted among one's greatest blessings in life.

Having felt the need to regain this fervor for service and to rededicate oneself to it I felt obligated to write about serving the Lord, the church, and one another. The Biblical representation that immediately emerges is the Blessed Virgin Mary and her life of complete devotion and service to the Lord Jesus Christ.

The Blessed St. Mary did not once say let me think about this manner of conception planned by God, foreign to her usual way of thinking, in which many will doubt my good name. The humble St. Mary did not question the role selected for her but replied that she would willingly serve as the handmaiden of the Lord, she did not offer up excuses such as if I don't have to give up my regularly scheduled activities, my one day off, if it doesn't take too much time of my personal time, or if it somehow fits into my hectic over extended schedule.

Rather, St. Mary replied...

"Behold the maidservant of the Lord! Let it be to me according to your word" (Luke 1:38).

As with all those counted by historians as "Greats among Greats" St. Mary achieved her greatness

through her manner of obedient service to the Lord. Her true greatness was derived through her willingness to serve not through the use of affluence having born the Lord Jesus Christ. Rather St. Mary used her influence to serve God and others.

"But Jesus called them to Himself and said, 'You know that the rulers of the Gentiles lord it over them, and those who are great exercise authority over them. Yet it shall not be so among you; but whoever desires to become great among you, let him be your servant'" (Matthew 20:25-26).

St. Mary became great through her service, through her quietness, her willingness and readiness to serve, and putting God first in her life's situation. It is very doubtful St. Mary desired greatness which made her even more endearing as the subject of this article related to serving.

This article and three others will tackle St. Mary's life of service:

- Part I: Who is St Mary,
- Part II: St. Mary's Young Adult Life of Service
- Part III: St. Mary's Adulthood
- Part IV: St. Mary's Late and Heavenly Life

Part I: Who is St. Mary?

Unique Childhood

In the city of Nazareth where her parents lived, St. Mary was born to St. Joachim and St. Anna both righteous and prayerful parents who loved God. Our Coptic Orthodox church celebrates the nativity of the Blessed Virgin Mary on the first day of the blessed Coptic month of Pashons.

On the seventh day of the blessed Coptic month of Mesore we celebrate the Annunciation to St. Joachim concerning the conception with the Virgin St. Mary. On this ?seventh day, while St. Joachim was on a mountain praying, Archangel Gabriel appeared to him and announced to him that his wife Anna would conceive and bear a child who would please not just them but the whole world would also be glad rejoicing in their heartfelt thankfulness to God. When he came unto his house after descending the mountain and told his wife of the annunciation by the Archangel Gabriel, St. Anna believed what the angel foretold without question.

Thus after many years of prayers and supplications night and day, the couple's dream came true and were in a position to fulfill their vow that should they be blessed with a child they would make it a steward of the temple. Tradition has it that St. Joachim's foremost reason for desiring a child was in order to

present an offering to God, but "he did not have any children".

Giving birth to St. Mary elevated St. Anna, making her more honorable than all the women of the world at that particular time in history. Once mocked by the children of Israel for being barren, and having born the scorn of other women keeping themselves away from St. Anna in the temple, she now rose not only above people's hypocrisy, but above them all through the grace of God.

St. Mary was of Davidic lineage through her own birth right. She was born into generations of family members that served the Lord. Tertullian (c. 197) writes "the prophet evidently asserts that the virgin of whom it behooved Christ to be born must derive her lineage of the seed of David. He says, 'And there will be born a rod from the root of Jesse'—which rod is Mary."

St. Joachim was of the seed of David, of the tribe of Judah. He was the son of Jotham, the son of Lazarus, the son of Eldad who ascended up in genealogy to Solomon the king, the son of David whom God promised that his seed should reign over the children of Israel forever. St. Joachim departed in peace when St. Mary was but three years old.

St. Anna was the daughter of Matthan, the son of Levi, the son of Melki, who was a descendant of Aaron the High Priest. Miriam, her mother was from the tribe of Judah. St. Anna had two sisters. The first (called Mary after her mother) was the mother of Salome, the midwife present at the birth of the Lord Jesus Christ. The second was Sofia, Elizabeth's mother, later the mother of St. John the Baptist.

The three cousins, St. Mary, Salome, and Elizabeth were to serve the Lord Jesus Christ; In addition, St. Elizabeth would bear a son that would not only serve but set the climate favorably for the coming of the Lord Jesus Christ.

At the age of three, St. Mary was taken to the temple and dedicated to God in fulfillment of her parents' promise to God. Her mother's faith was so strong as to make her willing to give up to the temple her long awaited -for daughter at the age of three to live among the virgins. The Coptic Church celebrates the day of St. Mary's entrance into the temple in Jerusalem on the third day of the blessed month of Koiahk consecrated at the age of three. St. Mary spent nine years learning service within the temple receiving her food from the hands of angels until the appointed time of the Incarnation of the Word.

Since it was not allowed to keep girls in the temple after the age of twelve; Zacharias The priest had to find a suitable husband and care provider for St. Mary. To do so, he gathered the staffs of her male relatives-- twelve righteous men from the house of David of the tribe of Judah- and placed them in the temple. One account records that the staffs were taken inside the Sanctuary and a dove flew and stood on the staff belonging to Joseph the carpenter who was a righteous man. Another account records that...accepted as God's will....the following day, the cane of St. Joseph the carpenter, budded just as Aaron's rod had in the Old Testament (Numbers 17:8)...

"Now it came to pass on the next day that Moses went into the tabernacle of witness, and behold, the rod of Aaron, of the house of Levi, had sprouted and put forth buds, had produced blossoms and yielded ripe almonds."

Some Biblical scholars believe that St. Joseph with the budding rod had been previously married, while other Biblical scholars believe he was united to St. Mary with chaste bonds as his one and only spouse. These scholars contend that St. Joseph was himself a virgin. Whatever the account chosen it is clearly denoted that St. Joseph was chosen to be the husband of St. Mary by God Himself.

St. Joseph's budding rod symbolized God's blessing upon St. Joseph and St. Mary and it was then understood that they were to become engaged. It pleased the Almighty God to select a man worthy of St. Mary. Thus they got engaged according to the custom of the law.

Distinct Lineage

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Unique Service



The Annunciation

The Commemoration of the Life Giving Annunciation is celebrated the twenty-ninth day of the blessed Coptic month of Paremhotep. When the God-appointed time since the creation, for the salvation of the world, had arrived; God sent the Archangel Gabriel to the Virgin St. Mary to proclaim the plan of the Divine conception and the glorious birth of the Lord Jesus Christ.

"Now in the sixth month the angel Gabriel was sent by God to a city of Galilee named Nazareth, to a virgin betrothed to a man whose name was Joseph, of the house of David. The virgin's name was Mary. And having come in, the angel said to her, 'Rejoice highly favored one, the Lord is with you; blessed

are you among women!

But when St. Mary saw the angel she was troubled at his saying and considered what manner of greeting this was. Then the angel said to her, 'Do not be afraid, Mary, for you have found favor with God.' And behold you will conceive in your womb and bring forth a Son and shall call His name Jesus. He will be great, and will be called the Son of the Highest; and the Lord God will give Him the throne of His father David. And He will reign over the house of Jacob forever, and of His kingdom there will be no end.

Then Mary said to the angel, 'How can this be, since I do not know a man?' And the angel answered and said to her, 'The Holy Spirit will come upon you, and the power of the Highest will overshadow you; therefore, also that Holy One who is to be born will be called the Son of God'" (Luke 1:26-35).

Further the angel gave her proof of this message and its discernment...

"Now indeed Elizabeth your relative has also conceived a son in her old age; and this is now the sixth month for her who was called barren. For with God nothing is impossible.' Then St. Mary said,

'Behold the maidservant of the Lord!' Let it be according to your word" (Luke 1:36).

At the Annunciation, St. Mary did not even give herself the legitimate right to stop and think about this dubious manner of conception planned by God, foreign to the natural course of things and which could possibly have jeopardized her family name and consequently ruined her life. The humble St. Mary did not question the role destined for her; but replied that she would willingly serve as the handmaiden of the Lord with no excuses such as "if I do not have to give up my regularly scheduled activities, my one day off, if it does not take too much time of my personal time, or if it somehow fits into my hectic over extended schedule."

Rather, St. Mary replied...

"Behold the maidservant of the Lord! Let it be to me according to your word" (Luke 1:38).

St. Mary's greatness, unlike that of those counted by earthly measures as "Greats among the Greats", was procured through sheer total submission, obedience, and willingness to serve; not out of affluence nor influence but out of total unconditional love for God and others.

"But Jesus called them to Himself and said, "You know that the rulers of the Gentiles lord it over them, and those who are great exercise authority over them. Yet it shall not be so among you; but whoever desires to become great among you, let him be your servant" (Matthew 20:25-26).

St. Mary became great through her quiet service, willingness and readiness, putting God first in her life. It is very doubtful that St. Mary desired greatness which makes her even more endearing as the focus of this article is related to serving.

St. Mary willingly, obediently, and agreeably accepted to serve God in the manner requested of her by Archangel Gabriel. Through this willing obedience, Three Eternal Persons came and dwelt in her womb. God, that very day, united with humanity a complete inseparable and unchangeable union. Therefore, this is the first of all celebrated Coptic feasts; for in it, was the beginning of all salvation of the world, which was ultimately fulfilled by the Glorious Resurrection of our Lord Jesus Christ, saving Adam and his offspring from the defilement and guise of Satan.

St. Irenaeus (c.180) writes, "Mary the virgin is found obedient, saying 'Behold the handmaiden of the Lord; be it unto me according to your word.' In

contrast Eve was disobedient. For she did not obey when she was still a virgin...Having become disobedient she was made the cause of death, both to herself and the entire human race. Correspondingly, Mary, who was also a virgin (although betrothed to a man), by yielding obedience, became the cause of salvation, both to herself and the whole human race...This demonstrates the corresponding reference from Mary back to Eve...So it was that the knot of Eve's disobedience was loosed by the obedience of Mary. For what the virgin Eve had bound fast, this did the virgin Mary set free through faith."

St. Mary willingly participated in this great mystery of Holiness without reservation nor hesitation concerning service to God. That is why the angel addressed her, "Hail, full of grace." Did this greeting inflate St. Mary's feelings of self worth? No, St. Mary appears to be firmly rooted in humility and in her lowliness realizes that any grace she possessed belonged to God. This is the mark of a true servant.

"Behold the maidservant of the Lord! Let it be to me according to your word" (Luke 1:38).

St. Mary, and St. Mary alone, readily consented and willingly served in obedience to the Lord.

Many early church fathers believe the Annunciation to St. Mary may have been the first among all the great mysteries to be honored liturgically.

It is thought that the Lord Jesus Christ became incarnate on April 7th thereby making it scientifically correct to purport his birth on January 7th. The next article will begin with our beloved St. Mary's young adult service surrounding the birth of our Lord Jesus Christ...

KE NIN KAI A EE KAI EIS TOUS E ONAS TON E
ONON. AMEN. Now and forever and unto the ages
of all ages AMEN. Whenever we stand in Your Holy
Sanctuary, we are considered standing in Heaven. O
Mother of God (Theotokos), you are the gate of
Heaven; open for us the gate of mercy. KYRIE
ELEISON. Lord have mercy.

Bishop Youssef
Bishop, Coptic Orthodox Diocese of the Southern
United States