



Introduction

Two thousand years have passed since the time of our Lord Jesus Christ on earth leaving behind much room for intellectualization as well as speculations. Above all, her time casts a perpetual illumination on the type of life our dear Mother of God had led and the duties carried out by those "humble hands".

The Holy Scripture does not provide detailed accounts of the day-to-day incidents during our Lord's growing periods from infancy to manhood; but through simple deduction, we discover that St. Mary played a vital role in our Lord's life. This article will consider the various stations at which St. Mary stood and proved herself to be of humble, yet, miraculously achieving hands.

Humble Circumstances

Our Lord was not born under wealthy nor even average middle class circumstances. St. Mary did not live in a palace or in a comfortable house. She was unknown to and by other women. She was not the subject of jealousy or envy; for she neither wore jewelry nor adorned her body with silk. It was never written about her that she used cosmetics nor wore

expensive perfumes, which were very common and essential for the women of her time.

Master of All Trades

Limited means always dictate and imply limited resources and harnessed satisfactions of needs and wants. It is evident that besides the poor financial resources under which St. Mary lived, she also lived at a time when technology did not provide the easy means to do household chores and errands. What can one suppose St. Mary did with her hands? One can only imagine her hands to have undertaken all the tasks placed before her. It is neither written in the Holy Scripture nor can we suppose that St. Mary thought any task was beneath her level, beyond her capacity, or outside her willing serving hands. It is neither recorded nor intimated anywhere in the Holy Scripture that St. Mary told others, "Do you know that I am the Mother of God and cannot be discovered doing this task or that?"

If this is true, then it can further be assumed that St. Mary's life was quiet and peaceful due to her submersion in the obscurity of the life and times of our Lord Jesus Christ's childhood.

At the Birth Place

A wife's primary function in the New Testament times was to bear children and to provide food,

clothing, and a clean home environment for her family. In the Old Testament, such a competent wife was to be treasured more than jewels. St. Mary is the epitome of a perfect, priceless woman—so humble at the birth of our Lord Jesus Christ while performing the most important task of propagating the family line. The honorable disciple, St. Luke, writes,

"And she brought forth her firstborn Son, and wrapped Him in swaddling cloths, and laid Him in a manger, because there was no room for them in the inn" (Luke 2:7).

While many scholars interpret the swaddling cloths as the burial clothes of the Lord, or the simplicity of the manger, yet, there lies another meaning of humbleness. Biblical births were usually attended by midwives who would cut the umbilical cord, rub the infant's skin with salt to strengthen it, and then place the infant in swaddling cloths that would provide the bones with the environment necessary for them to be healthy, strong, and in proper alignment.

Apparently, the Mother of God did not have nor would want to have any assistance with wrapping her Son in swaddling cloths, as we know she did this with her own hands. In a manger with animals surrounding her, and a statistically confirmed and scholarly acknowledged high mortality rate for

children and their mothers at the time, yet, St. Mary's hands were undeterred. Can one imagine the love within those two hands and the caring that came from them? We can, thus, assume that St. Mary nursed and personally participated in the care of her own Child.

In the Kitchen

At one of my visitations, a mother apologetically said to me, "Your Grace, I am not a good cook, so before preparing your meal, I prayed to St. Mary for her assistance." At that moment, I realized that it is certain that St. Mary did not send her family to any fast food restaurant, but fed them herself, and prepared the meals for our Lord Jesus Christ; something I had not previously considered. I pondered over that fact for many days.

At the Bakers

Certainly, St. Mary's hands were not auspicious. They did much for her family. She did not believe that her hands could not perform any particular task or service to her family. Finding herself in the midst of a carpenter's home, she most probably could not afford meat daily at evening meals. Therefore, she baked bread. Baking bread was usually a woman's chore that was lengthy in time and certainly not an exciting one. The flour would require grinding—perhaps barley, and on occasions—wheat, if the

carpentry trade was fruitful. After many hours of grinding, followed by mixing and kneading, the flour was placed in an oven outside the house. The loaves of bread would then be watched until baked. This chore would be repeated day after day.

"Now the woman had a fatted calf in the house, and she hastened to kill it. And she took flour and kneaded it, and baked unleavened bread from it" (I Samuel 28:24).

It is doubtful that St. Mary paid a professional baker to bake the bread for her. Perhaps this is where our Lord, as a child, got the inspiration from watching His mother daily laboring at baking bread. Perhaps that is where He extended her spiritual grounding to His disciples when He taught them to pray, saying, "Give us this day our daily bread" (Matthew 6:11), Indeed, we cannot ignore the fact that Jesus Christ, the Man, learned a lot from His blessed mother.

At the Well

In the New Testament times, women drew water for cooking, drinking, washing, and cleaning. One can imagine there was no abundance of furniture in her home; perhaps straw mats and animal skins were used for sleeping. Maybe, for sitting, a ledge ran around the perimeter of the inside of the home? A carpenter's home probably meant frugality and

extreme modest means. Basic kitchen equipment may have been jars for food and water, an oven made of clay or stone, as well as a grain-grinding tool. We are not told of wooden pieces with inlaid ivory in her home or bronze chairs and bed frames. Nowhere is it written that St. Mary prayed for such things or regretted having been engaged to a poor man, as St. Joseph.

Within this framework of St. Mary's home, one realizes that her hands not only fed her family, but must have kept the home clean and orderly as well. She would have washed floors and clothes with her own hands. Surely, she carried water, as we are not told that others did it for her nor did she have any daughters of her own to assist with the chores of cleaning or carrying water pots to and from a well or any other water procuring destination.

Truly, the scholar Tertullian well described St. Mary's intricate home and family situation, saying:

"The wealthier a woman is—inflated with the name of matron—the more spacious of a house she requires for her burdens. It is as if it were a field where ambition may run its course. To such a person, the churches look paltry. A rich husband is a difficult thing to find in the House of God...To such a Christian woman, it is irksome to marry a believer

inferior to herself in estate...However, she will be dowered with an ampler dowry from the goods of him who is rich in God" (Tertullian c. 205).

At the Loom

Someone had to make our Lord Jesus Christ's very simple tunics. Again, it is doubtful that a professional tailor custom-made them. Rather, St. Mary certainly accomplished that, especially since needle work was among the talents in which women of the time excelled and had to learn out of necessity, and not just for the fun of it.

Thus, St. Mary had to sit at a loom that weaved threads into cloth. It was an arduous task—at best, to weave those threads into cloth for clothes. The Holy Scripture mentions those garments on Great Friday after our Lord was crucified:

"Then the soldiers, when they had crucified Jesus, took His garments and made four parts, to each soldier a part and also the tunic. Now the tunic was without seam, woven from the top in one piece" (John 19:23).

At the Teacher's Desk

St. Mary was responsible for the spiritual, physiological, and psychological care and wellbeing of the Child, Jesus Christ. Thus, our Lord emerged as a well-rounded and stable personality who left the

Pharisees and well-educated men of that time stunned and spinning around themselves at His teachings. "*Blessed are you among women, and blessed is the fruit of your womb!*" (Luke 1:42). Indeed, St. Mary raised the status and standard of women generally, and those of her time specifically, to the extent that our Lord Jesus Christ included women in His parables, within His travels, and among His disciples. This had to have been the result of the only woman we know who was present throughout His entire life, His Mother, the Holy and Blessed Virgin, St. Mary. Perhaps this was our Lord Jesus Christ's way of honoring His mother. "Honor your parents as the authors of your life" (Apostolic Constitutions c. 390).

Through a prophetic revelation, Solomon, the prophet and king, described St. Mary, saying:

"Who can find a virtuous wife? For her worth is far above rubies. The heart of her husband safely trusts her; so he will have no lack of gain. She does him good and not evil all the days of her life. She seeks wool and flax, and willingly works with her hands. She is like the merchant ships, she brings her food from afar. She also rises while it is yet night, and provides food for her household, and a portion for her maidservants. She considers a field and buys it; from her profits she plants a vineyard. She girds

herself with strength, and strengthens her arms. She perceives that her merchandise is good, and her lamp does not go out by night.

She stretches out her hands to the distaff, and her hand holds the spindle. She extends her hand to the poor, yes, she reaches out her hands to the needy. She is not afraid of snow for her household, for all her household is clothed with scarlet. She makes tapestry for herself; her clothing is fine linen and purple. Her husband is known in the gates, when he sits among the elders of the land. She makes linen garments and sells them, and supplies sashes for the merchants. Strength and honor are her clothing; she shall rejoice in time to come. She opens her mouth with wisdom, and on her tongue is the law of kindness. She watches over the ways of her household, and does not eat the bread of idleness. Her children rise up and call her blessed; her husband also, and he praises her: 'Many daughters have done well, but you excel them all.' Charm is deceitful and beauty is passing, but a woman who fears the LORD, she shall be praised" (Proverbs 31:10-30).

May the humble hands of our beloved Mother of God teach us all the lessons of humbleness, love, and immeasurable care.

"O Virgin Mary, the holy Theotokos, the faithful patroness of the human race, intercede on our behalf before Christ, whom you bore, that He may grant us the forgiveness of our sins" (The Divine Liturgies of Saints Basil, Gregory, and Cyril, 2nd edition).

Bishop Youssef

Bishop, Coptic Orthodox Diocese of the Southern
United States