

THE MOTHER OF GOD: A CONTEMPLATIVE REALIST

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IN our highly secularized age, there are many who would find the linking of the words *contemplative* and *realist* a conundrum, if not an absurdity. Crudely expressed, the general notion would be that a contemplative is someone with his head in the clouds and a realist someone with his feet on the ground. And there is little doubt, in this hard age, which of two deserves respect and which deserves contempt. The secular consensus would be that the contemplative is engaged in a flight from reality and, at best, might deserve our pity. There would be little question that the realist is “where it’s at.”

I think, though, that the pity might be better directed against the realist – the *mere* realist – as having the more restricted view and the more constricted life. For while the mere realist cannot accept the contemplative’s vision, the contemplative is able to span both views and be a realist as well. The Mother of God is an example of what I mean.

Note the presence of the word and idea of temple in the word contemplative. The contemplative is he or she who recognizes creation as the temple of God and sees all things in it under the aspect of God’s rule and governance. Nothing created is alien to the contemplative’s vision, for this vision is that of the Creator himself who in creating saw all things as good, even very good. The mere realist, wholly enmeshed within creation and having no vision of a Creator, sees only what is before his eyes and is blind to any higher or greater vision.

We know from the Church’s tradition and liturgy that the Mother of God was introduced to the life of the Temple from her early years. She who would be the womb and vessel of God was no stranger to God’s house or to God’s mind and view. She became, as a result of this early initiation into temple life, a true contemplative. But she also was and remained a perfectly earthy and realistic woman.

It is because of this richness of her nature, and its careful balance, that she greets the angel of the Annunciation with two statements: one, an earthy question, as to the how of this heavenly action: “How can this be since I know not a man?” Blunt biology lies behind that realistic question and it receives a complete and honest answer that goes beyond biology and science into the region of the temple and its holiness: “The Holy Ghost shall come upon thee, and the power of the most high shall overshadow thee.” To the wisdom and truth of such words mere realism has no access – they simply do not compute. But blessed Mary – expert in both realism and contemplation – recognizes at once the full reality and

truth of the angel’s words. And her whole-hearted response is immediate, unhesitating, unclouded by ignorance or doubt: “Be it done unto me according to thy word.” Fiat! – let it be so!

And it was so – and the history of the world radically changed at that moment and the long exile and alienation of our race from God was reversed. Who else but a contemplative realist could have so responded? For in so assenting to the angel’s words – and to God’s will – she took upon herself not only the conception of God’s Son within her, but the full responsibility of bearing a child, of nurturing and raising a child – with its years of wearying toil and heartbreak.

For this woman – this contemplative realist – God was no mere concept or notion. For centuries the theologians and prophets of Israel had tried to capture in words something of this vast divine reality. Yet it is she, humble Israelite woman, who carried the Word alive and kicking in her belly. She herself became the living temple of God, having been nurtured to do so by a life of contemplation, of being conformed to the reality of life with God.

No stranger to the temple, no stranger to the sheer facts of earthly life, this is the woman who became God’s birth-giver, who nurtured him, washed his clothes, cooked his meals, bandaged his scrapes, wiped away his childhood tears. No aspect of human joy or tragedy was alien to this woman. Life had not to explain itself to her. She had given birth to her Creator, to infinite Love; she would see infinite Love slaughtered before her eyes. She can rightly say with the pagan writer Terence: “Homo sum: nil humanum alienum puto.” “I am a human being and find nothing that is human alien to me.” That’s the realist speaking. But the contemplative in her knew, as the pagan writer could not, that the very meaning and destiny of being human had changed in the birth of her Child. He, by taking on our wounded humanity, leads it out of captivity to sin and death, emptying the tombs of our lives.

All of this is part of the role of Mary, contemplative realist, who shows us the pattern we must follow in being vessels whereby Christ enters and conquers the world today. As blessed as she was, her Son, affirming her blessedness, goes on to say, “Yes, but blessed are you who hear the word of God and keep it.” We are summoned to the same vocation as she – to bring forth Christ into the world. And we must do it in the same manner, with our hearts grounded in God by contemplation, and our feet firmly on the ground in the sin-haunted reality of our world.

What a perfect image and pattern for an Oblate in the world is this holy woman who, by her perfect obedience and Fiat – Thy will be done -- becomes in the midst of earthly things a temple vessel bearing God into the world. §