

[Isaiah 61:10-11](#)
[Galatians 4:4-7](#)
[Luke 1:46-55](#)
[Psalm 34:1-9](#)

PREACHED BY THE REVEREND ALISTAIR SO ON THE FEAST OF SAINT MARY THE VIRGIN, AUGUST 17, 2008, AT ALL HALLOWS CHURCH, SOUTH RIVER PARISH, IN DAVIDSONVILLE, MARYLAND

In the Name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit. Amen.

Santa Fe is one of the oldest cities in the United States. It also has one of the oldest cathedrals in the country: Saint Francis Cathedral. Inside the cathedral, there is a shrine: a side Chapel dedicated to the Blessed Virgin Mary. In it is enshrined the oldest statue of the Virgin Mary in the United States. I visited there back in April when I was attending the Ecumenical Roundtable on Science, Technology, and Faith in New Mexico. As I approached the Chapel, I saw a plaque engraved both in Spanish and English: La Conquistadora; and in English: Our Lady of Peace. My first reaction was: Oh really? I know enough Spanish to know the difference. On further studying the history behind this statue, I learned that there was a revolt of the Native Americans against the Spanish colonists on August 12, 1680. As a result, the Native Americans regained their territory. Twelve years later, the Spaniards marched back into Santa Fe with La Conquistadora, reclaiming the territory in a bloodless reconquest. Perhaps because of this legend, the contemporary English title for La Conquistadora is Our Lady of Peace instead of Our Lady of the Conquest.

Supposedly, this is the same Virgin Mary from our Gospel lesson today, who chanted the Magnificat, recounting the mercy of God for all generations and God's favor toward the meek and lowly; the same Mary who visited her cousin Elizabeth; the same Mary who was the earthen vessel of the Incarnate Word of God. But that's not the end of it. Through the Christian centuries, there have been many accounts of her apparition. For instance, the Virgin of Guadalupe on our Continent, who served as a vessel of Christianization of much of Latin America. Nevertheless, some historians believe that the legend of the brown-faced Virgin of Guadalupe was a ploy used by the Spaniards to convert the indigenous population. The faithful followers defend the validity of Guadalupe by citing numerous miracles performed in her name. Similarly, there is our Lady of Czeschtowa who was a symbol of Polish identity, our Lady of Kazan for the Russians, and our Lady of Lourdes for the French. And for the English speaking world, the twelfth century apparition of the Virgin in Walsingham, England, has been an enduring symbol of Marian devotion. To date, there are two shrines dedicated to the Virgin at Walsingham, one Anglican and the other Roman Catholic. Although I believe that you cannot truly ascertain the historicity of all these apparitions of the Virgin Mary, the piety and sentiments attached to her transform and transcend the boundaries of time and history.

Now, you may ask: what has all this to do with being Episcopalian: *voilà la question*. Or in an even more practical sense: what can Mary do for us after all? Being the church of the *via media* at the crossroad between Protestantism and Catholicism, the Episcopal Church has always emphasized the importance of comprehensiveness in matters of doctrines and faith: with the role of the mother of Jesus being one of the many areas where the two main branches of Christianity meet. Unlike the Roman Catholic Church, which has a set of clearly defined dogmas and doctrines about Mary, ranging from her perpetual virginity to her Immaculate Conception and Assumption, the Anglican Communion does not have such definitive utterances on the mother of Jesus. In the Episcopal Church, you can find churches where the belief about Mary is totally in sync with the Romans, and also churches where she is simply a character in the Bible that does not get much airtime. At All Hallows, she is somewhere in-

between at the moment. Mary is a source of Christian treasure only if we seek to understand her and experience her intercession.

For many years, I didn't quite get Mary. Why is it necessary to go through Mary to Jesus, then to God? I was told by a friend who is a Russian Orthodox priest, that in some places in Russia, the faithful would prefer to go through Mary in their prayers for most things, so as not to bother the big boss: Jesus Christ. As I continue to mature in my faith, I realized that was an oversimplification. Mary is a human symbol of total submission to God. When she said "yes" to the Angel Gabriel at the Annunciation whereby the Son of God was conceived, one of the most significant moments of our faith tradition and human history happened. The significance of Mary is that there is still hope in humanity after the Fall in the Garden of Eden. She said yes to God. And so can we. We say in the Lord's Prayer, "Thy will be done." As we imitate the "fiat" or "will" or "total submission" to God by Mary, we follow Jesus' mandate as we submit to God in the totality of our being. I believe that is why the personal motto of the late John Paul II was "totus tuus" (all yours) to the Virgin Mary.

Mary is a source of Christian inspiration. Like the other disciples of Jesus Christ, Mary is a pointer to Christ through and through. Although St. Paul teaches us that Jesus is our mediator and advocate, this fact does not exclude the potential of Mary to be our secondary mediator and advocate. Mary is a person of faith. For her, caring and empathy trumps any theological assertions, as we see through the hands of Luke the Evangelist, in her visitation with her cousin Elizabeth who is pregnant with John the Baptist in her womb. Elizabeth immediately realizes the blessedness of Mary and her womb, the Lord Jesus Christ. For these two women, the warmth of their meeting and visit is the context in which theology develops: "And blessed is she who believed that there would be a fulfillment of what was spoken to her by the Lord." Mary's visitation serves as a symbol for the essence of pastoral care: personal, relational, and inspirational. In the backdrop and context of the visit of two pregnant women, Mary's soul proclaims the greatness of the Lord; her soul rejoices in God her Savior---her *Magnificat*, which has become an enduring chant of God's infinite goodness and mercy throughout the ages.

The true significance of Mary does not always reside in the Cult of Mary, but in the realization of the *Magnificat*. I want to point out here "cult" is used in a technical, neutral sense here as religious vocabulary. "Cult" simply means a system of religious veneration and devotion to a particular figure. Therefore, we hear of the "cult of saints" sometimes with its various forms of devotions. I believe that that most active Marian devotion is the living out of the message of the *Magnificat*,

He has brought down the powerful from their thrones,
and lifted up the lowly;
he has filled the hungry with good things,
and sent the rich away empty.

While there is nothing intrinsically wrong with power and wealth, the abuse thereof is an affront to the justice and dignity of all human beings, thereby hindering global good and reconciliation. My sisters and brothers in Christ, in our day, we are called to bring out this ministry of global good and reconciliation as we follow the footsteps of our Savior in our own context. By God's grace, the Episcopal Church has said that our larger vision in the coming years will be framed and shaped by the Millennium Development Goals toward a world where the hungry are fed, the sick are healed, the young educated, women and men treated equally, and where all have access to clean water, adequate sanitation, and basic healthcare, and the promise of development that does not endanger the rest of creation. But this vision of global good and reconciliation can only meaningfully begin to take concrete shape if we are first interiorly converted to love and embrace the spirit of equality and gratefulness to God embedded in the *Magnificat*.

When we engage in the work of global good and reconciliation, we live out the spirit of the *Magnificat*; we live out the spirit of Mary. Mary is a symbol of faith; Mary is the Mother of God; Mary is a movement that calls us to become “contemplatives in liberation” from the bondage of sin into the bosom of God. May we be then strengthened by Mary who always points to Jesus Christ her Son, our Savior. Hail Mary, full of grace, the Lord is with thee. Blessed art thou amongst women, and blessed is the fruit of thy womb Jesus.

Amen.

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