

Mary

The Spirit-filled Woman

This is the sixth in a series of articles on IMAGES OF MARY TODAY, and the second of four reflections on Mary and the Holy Spirit. Written by Pat Bearsley SM.

Last month we reflected on Mary Holy Spirit by considering the wealth of Old Testament allusion that forms the background to St Luke's account of the Annunciation.

This month let us reflect again on the Annunciation, but this time with a closer focus on the relationship between Mary and the Holy Spirit at the moment of the Incarnation.

The relationship between Mary and the Holy Spirit is obviously a most intimate one, but we should be chary of imagery which suggests that it was a sort of marriage partnership. Although there is a tradition in the Church which calls Mary "the Bride of the Holy Spirit", and the Spirit "the Spouse of the Virgin Mary", we should be cautious in our use of such images. For the Holy Spirit is not a substitute for St Joseph. In no way did He act as a surrogate husband.

The conception of Jesus was not like the conception of an ordinary child - with the Holy Spirit taking the place of the father. In normal human generation both husband and wife are equal partners in the conception of their child. But this was not the case in the conception of Jesus.

The early Christians, conscious of the pagan religions around them, eschewed any suggestion that the conception of Jesus was anything like the mythological conceptions of heroes, which involved a god dallying with a mortal maiden. For them the virginal conception was an emphatic assertion of their belief that not only did Jesus not have any human father, but also that his *manner* of conception was not in human fashion either. Their belief in Mary's virginity expressed their conviction that Jesus had only one father - the Father in heaven - and that his coming into the world was solely through the power of the Holy Spirit.

For Jesus was a *new* creation-and new being who was wholly divine and wholly human. He was sent into the world by the Father - a gratuitous gift from God, sent at God's free initiative. His coming was not a natural event. It did not follow the inexorable laws of nature which regulate every natural human conception. For he was Lord of Creation, the Lord of Nature, to whom all the laws of nature are subject. Mary's virginal conception of Jesus showed forth the truth of these basic Christian beliefs.

Mary co-operated with the Holy Spirit, not as a wife with her husband, but as a free created being with her God. For it was not the Holy Spirit who became man. He is not human. He is God, the Third Person of the Blessed Trinity, and He always acts according to his nature - that is, as God, in a transcendent manner.

The conception of Jesus was a mysterious event. The Gospels are silent when it comes to describing what actually happened. And it would be futile for us to try to imagine the event. But we can be sure that the Holy Spirit would have acted in characteristic fashion. He always acts "from within" the person, in the depths of his/her being. He is not an external cause, imposing his power from outside the person. No, as God He enters into the very fibre of one's being, acting gently, never destroying one's freedom as a person, but enabling that person to realise his/her potential as a free child of God. As St Paul says in his letter to the Romans: "The Spirit you received is not the spirit of slaves bringing fear into your lives again; it is the spirit of sons and daughters, and it makes us cry out 'Abba! Father!' The Spirit himself and our spirit bear united witness that we are children of God." (Romans 8.15-16).

The Spirit transforms us into sons and daughters of God. Because of this transformation we can relate to God in terms of great intimacy. We are entitled to call him "Abba" - a term of affectionate intimacy and informality that a child may use to his father, similar to our term "Dad". It may seem strange for us to address God as "Dad", but that was Jesus' preferred name for his Father, and the important thing for us is that we too are now entitled to do the same. This implies a great intimacy with God that is available to us. We do not have to stand on formality; we do not have to make great preparations or "pretty ourselves up" (through confession, long prayers, or penance's) before we can approach the Father. Rather like an innocent child we can run to him whenever we want and be sure that He will welcome us with love and tenderness.

And all this is the work of the Holy Spirit. He empowers us to have this easy relationship with God. but notice that St Paul says that the Spirit "makes us cry our `Abba! Father !'".

Although He dwells within us and enables us to call God "Abba", nevertheless it is us who do the calling. He does not destroy our personality. He does not change us into something other than what we really are or are called to be - sons and daughters of God. He respects our freedom and our autonomy as persons. He does not change us into puppets or automata who have no option but to do their master's bidding. No, we cry out "Abba! Father!" - but only through the enabling power of the Spirit.

And similarly with Mary. She freely and wholly consented to what God was asking of her at the annunciation. "Let it happen to me according to your word." Her "Fiat" was her own free response to God's invitation. But she was able to make this commitment through the power of the Holy Spirit dwelling within her. *He inspired* her to accept what God was offering (even though it meant giving up her own plans for the future), and *He empowered* her to offer herself wholly to Him. In this way she became the mother of his Son.

For Mary's "Yes" was not simply an act of faith and commitment to God. It was also the very act whereby she became the mother of God. It was also a generative act. As St Augustine so acutely observed: "Mary did not have intercourse and conceive; rather she believed and conceived". A woman gives herself in love and commitment to her husband and conceives. Mary gave herself in love and commitment to God and conceived. But she was able to do this only through the power of the Holy Spirit.

Thus we can gain some insight into the relationship between the Holy Spirit and Mary at the Incarnation. Rather than it being a husband/wife type of relationship, it was essentially a transcendent relation of God with one of his creation. He did not act externally to her; He did not strike her with a thunderbolt from on high. Rather He worked gently and quietly from within, empowering her to consent to what was being asked of her-and in that consent she became mother.

But even though the Holy Spirit enabled her to give her consent, that consent remained Mary's own personal free act. She was no puppet. She was not passive. She was not in a trance, acting according to the whim of a supernatural hypnotist. Her consent was a momentous act in the history of the world: not only was her consent her act of conceiving Christ, it was also the act of unredeemed creation co-operating in its own redemption.

Finally we can see in this precious moment something of what the Incarnation really means. The Father spoke his Word to Mary, and Mary responded by echoing back to the Father his Word in her own terms. This echo was the Word made flesh. The Father uttered his divine Word - his Son sent forth into the world. Mary responded by echoing that same Word back to the Father, but now in human form, according to her own nature. God spoke in his own language (divinely), and Mary replied in hers (humanly) - and the result was that God became man. The Son received all his divinity from the Father and all his humanity from Mary. No one else contributed to his humanness. Through the Holy Spirit Mary was able to utter the Word of God - not with her tongue - but in her womb.

This co-operation of Mary with the Spirit sets the pattern for the relationship of all Christians with the Spirit of God. Although the Incarnation was a unique event, never to be repeated, nevertheless analogously it finds its echoes in the rebirth of every Christian according to the Spirit. We are all called to be sons and daughters of God, made in the image of the First Born, Jesus Christ, our elder brother. We are all called to "give flesh to the Word", to make Jesus Christ come alive within our hearts. We are children of God, belonging to God's family, only to the extent that the Father can see his Son in us, the pattern of all sonship. And this is the work of the Holy Spirit, fashioning us into the likeness of the Son. As with Mary, He works from within our being, gently but powerfully. He does not destroy our freedom; we can resist his action or ignore his inspiration. but it is only through Him that we are entitled and empowered to cry out "Abba! Father!".