

Hail Mary!

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Atrue relationship with Mary, the mother of Jesus, can be a source of lifelong joy and encouragement for Carmelites. However, when I began to explore the Lay Carmelites I thought I probably did not have a place in the Order because of my lack of devotional attitude. The only devotion I remembered were the times my parents lined my brother, sister and me up, usually on a Saturday or Sunday afternoon, insisting that we pray the rosary together as a family. Even now I can feel myself fidgeting just as the three of us did during those times that my parents insisted we practice this devotion together.

As my formation began I realized that I had the wrong idea of how Carmelites showed admiration for Mary and eventually I was able to reconcile my lack of attraction to devotional practices surrounding her. She came alive for me when I realized Mary can be a model and guide, mother and sister to the church, to Carmelites, and to me. I discovered, and continue to discover what it means to have an authentic relationship with Our Lady. The key, I believe, is to ponder Mary's many virtues as an example of how our lives should be lived as followers of Jesus Christ. We must try to imitate her exceptional character.

I discovered that even if the practice of traditional devotions such as the rosary or novenas do not come easy, it is still quite possible for the mysteries or circumstances of Mary's life to thoroughly penetrate my own. I found that indeed the rosary, as long as it is a prayerful and meditative practice, is one way to definitely get to know Mary. It can also be equally helpful to reflect on these same experiences in other areas of our prayer life, including meditation or recollection. Her life may parallel our own at times or in the lives of our loved ones. Taking the time to reflect on selected mysteries of the rosary can help us to relate to Mary's life in a more personal way, depending on our life situation at any given time.

As we begin to be in touch with Mary in the mysteries of the rosary and in Scripture and as we take the time to listen during the quiet times we carve out of our busy lives, we find a Mary we can understand and relate to. We become in touch with her gentle spirit and thoughtful ways. We become amazed at her underlying strength and acceptance. We are able to imagine the beauty in her that captured God's heart. With this newfound awareness we realize that imitation, even if it is in some small insignificant manner, is the true way to model her many virtues and this in turn will honor Mary.

We discover that Mary does not require unceasing attention for herself or, to put it in more twenty-first century terms, she is not a "high maintenance" person. We discover that Our Lady's true desire is that we follow her son, Jesus Christ, unceasingly and unswervingly, just as she did. This is what makes her happy because she knows that our Lord is the only one who can transform us.

Saint Therese of Lisieux says that "Mary is more Mother than Queen." Reflecting that Mary not only bore our savior but that she also bore many trials, difficulties and sorrows as his mother can help in our relationship with her. She experienced these things as only a mother can and she gives us hope in our own situations.

Exploring Mary as a mother seems a likely theme; however, she has also been viewed by Carmelites over the centuries as sister, one who walks with us and advises us just as a big sister might. A sister is someone with whom we share many childhood experiences. With a sister we share a certain commonality and intimacy that sometimes is not present in our feelings about our mothers.

When we look to Mary as mother and sister we can easily imagine her as the first

and perfect disciple to Jesus Christ. We see the faith that led her throughout her life from that first announcement of her impending pregnancy to the foot of the cross. Our Lady shows us how to be completely open to God's transforming power. She shows us how to listen to the Word. She shows us what it means to wait in faithfulness.

I like to think of Mary as a contemplative. I picture her as someone who listened for the voice of God and pondered the Word much more than she ever cared to express her own opinion. This is not to say that Mary had no opinion but that as a contemplative she had a wisdom and strength that transcended the need to place her own agenda before God's. She was willing to listen to God and then to set her own dreams and plans aside when she heard what He had to say. God's agenda became her agenda. She allowed God to transform her as He chose. She said yes to His plan for her. God still looks for people who will listen to His voice and agree to help out with His plan. He can only change the world through our "yes."

Viewing Mary in a different light can bring one to a deeper level of maturity. With time perhaps we will find that Mary's agenda, which was God's agenda, will become more and more our own agenda too. Mary is here to guide us, to help us, and to always model true faithfulness to her son. This is what is dear to her heart. And when we discover this we can sincerely say, Hail Mary, full of Grace! **CR**



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