



Chapter III

Mary and the Preferential Option for the Poor

UNDERSTANDING

(for your preparation as a leader)

Pages 42 - 53

DISCUSSION

(to use with your group)

Pages 54 - 62

UNDERSTANDING

WHAT DO I NEED TO KNOW ABOUT THIS PASSAGE?

Main Point: The primary goal of this chapter is to explain the Preferential Option for the Poor, a hallmark principle of Catholic Social Teaching. By contrasting the Blessed Virgin Mary with the story of the “rich young man” in the Gospel of Matthew, this chapter shows that encountering the poor can be a transformational source of holiness.

- Outside of Christ, Mary is the model for human holiness. Her humble, receptive response at the Annunciation is an example for us all.¹
- The rich young man is the opposite of Mary, not only in his actions but also in his sense of identity. Whereas Mary was humble, the rich young man was prideful.
- Catholic Social Teaching says that Christians should have a certain preference for the poor. This preference will guide us in determining right action, but it will also help us to cultivate Marian humility and Christ-centered identity.

¹ If you find the content in this chapter too simple, please make ready use of the footnotes to augment discussion. The first section sets Mary as an exemplar of humility. I know of no better (both thorough and concise) exposition of humility than Aquinas’ treatment in the Summa - see Saint Thomas’ *Summa Theologiae, Second Part of the Second Part, Questions 161-162*. You can easily access the content on New Advent here: <https://www.newadvent.org/summa/3161.htm>

Mary: A Simple Young Woman

Not counting the Person of Christ, there is no greater person in history than the Virgin Mary. Salvation is through Christ alone, but Jesus became flesh through Mary's "yes" at the Annunciation. She is the conduit through which the Redeemer of the universe entered time and space. For this reason, the Church honors Mary. Her role in salvation cannot be understated, but this chapter is not about Mary's grandeur. It's about her littleness.

Mary was insignificant in the eyes of the world, but her status did not stop God from choosing her as the mother of His only Son. In fact, it may have been Mary's humility which allowed her to accept such a great mission. Let's take a moment to appreciate Mary's humility. Pope St. John Paul II said that Mary's presence, compared to the rest of Israel, was "a presence so discreet as to pass almost unnoticed by the eyes of her contemporaries."² At the time of the Annunciation, Mary was a mere teenager with no social standing whatsoever. Her parents, Joachim and Ann, may have had some modest wealth, but nothing which would have given Mary a leg up on her contemporaries. Again, Mary was an unknown girl. Nevertheless, the Gospels attest that this girl was to become the Mother of God. Let's take a look at the story from the Gospel of Luke:

"In the sixth month the angel Gabriel was sent from God to a city of Galilee named Nazareth, to a virgin betrothed to a man whose name was Joseph, of the house of David; and the virgin's name was Mary. And he came to her and said, 'Hail, full of grace, the Lord is with you!' But she was greatly troubled at the saying and considered in her mind what sort of greeting this might be."³

² John Paul II. *Redemptoris Mater*. 3.

³ Luke 1:26 – 29

Before we read the rest of the story, we'll pause for just a moment. Take note of Mary's response. After the angel greets Mary, referring to her as "full of grace," Mary is taken aback. Luke says she is "deeply troubled" at the angel's greeting. This reaction attests to her humility. Mary was not one to want the spotlight. And "full of grace" — what a lofty title! Why on earth would an angel be referring to Mary in this way? Humility characterizes Mary's response, but the story continues:

"And the angel said to her, 'Do not be afraid, Mary, for you have found favor with God. And behold, you will conceive in your womb and bear a son, and you shall call his name Jesus. He will be great, and will be called the Son of the Most High; and the Lord God will give to him the throne of his father David, and he will reign over the house of Jacob forever; and of his kingdom there will be no end.'"⁴

Let's pause again for a moment here. Think about what it would have been like for Mary to receive this news from an angel. Without any warning, at the age of fourteen, Mary learns that she is to give birth to God. In an instant, her life has been radically changed. Understandably, she asks, "How can this be, since I have no husband?" To this, the angel responds:

The Holy Spirit will come upon you, and the power of the most high will overshadow you; therefore, the child to be born will be called holy, the Son of God. And behold, your kinswoman Elizabeth in her old age has also conceived a son; and this is the sixth month with her who was called barren. For with God nothing will be impossible.⁵

⁴ Luke 1:30 – 33

⁵ Luke 1:35 – 38

Wow! Mary's world will never be the same again. But here is the most important part of the story: Mary's response. After receiving some life-altering news, Mary responds in unadorned simplicity. There is no fanfare, no drama, no need for undue explanation. Instead, she replies in Luke 1:38 saying: "I am the handmaid of the Lord; let it be done to me according to thy word."

Mary's humility is characterized by a radical *receptivity* to God's plan. And this receptivity allowed her to realize her own identity. You might say Mary possessed a humble emptiness. And in this emptiness, she did not allow herself to be filled with the false promises of wealth, fame or power. Instead, she humbly waited for God to do His work. She let God fill her. Once He did, Mary gained not only an awe-inspiring sense of God's mercy, but also a deep appreciation of her own identity and calling. Mary's littleness became a road through which God showed the world her greatness. It is for this reason that, just a little while after her meeting with the angel, Mary would exclaim to her cousin:

"My soul magnifies the Lord, and my spirit rejoices in God my Savior, for he has regarded the low estate of his handmaiden. For behold, henceforth all generations will call me blessed; for he who is mighty has done great things for me, and holy is his name."⁶

Mary's "yes" to the angel Gabriel is referred to as her *fiat*: her joyful acceptance of the will of God. And what a "yes" it was! Mary's willingness to do God's will was perhaps the single most significant thing ever done by anyone other than Christ. Think about it: By saying "yes" to the angel Gabriel, Mary literally conceived divine life in her

⁶ Luke 1:46 – 49

womb! She brought Christ into the world, which in turn allowed Him to save the world. Furthermore, she did all this with humility. Mary refers to herself as the “handmaiden” of the Lord. She knew she was not going to do anything without Christ, so what did she do? Mary courageously and humbly said “yes” to Christ, allowing Him to change her life and the entire world forever. Mary’s humble “yes” was adventurous — it set her on a journey which would engulf the rest of her life and transform the world.

The Rich Young Man

The point of this second section is to contrast the Virgin Mary with someone who responded to God’s call in a different way: the rich young man. The rich young man is completely opposite from Mary. Let’s take a look at his story from the Gospel of Matthew:

“Now someone approached him and said, ‘Teacher, what good must I do to gain eternal life?’ He answered him, ‘Why do you ask me about the good? There is only One who is good. If you wish to enter into life, keep the commandments.’ He asked him, ‘Which ones?’ And Jesus replied, “‘You shall not kill; you shall not commit adultery; you shall not steal; you shall not bear false witness; honor your father and your mother’; and “you shall love your neighbor as yourself.” The young man said to him, ‘All of these I have observed. What do I still lack?’ Jesus said to him, ‘If you wish to be perfect, go, sell what you have and give to [the] poor, and you will have treasure in heaven. Then come, follow me.’ When the young man heard this statement, he went away sad, for he had many possessions.”⁷

⁷ Matthew 19:16 – 22

Again, Mary could not be any more different than the rich young man. Whereas Mary was humble, he was prideful. Whereas Mary was docile to the will of God, the rich young man was stuck in his ways. Whereas Mary cared for nothing except God, the man cared more for his possessions. Mary's decision led to an extraordinary adventure, one which has been extolled throughout history. The rich young man gave up an opportunity, and history records his actions as a disappointment.

But Mary and the rich young man were not only different when it comes to their actions, they also differed at the level of *identity*. On one hand, the story of the rich young man is the story of a person enslaved by possessions — or, rather, a person who identifies with his possessions. Scripture tells us: “For where your treasure is, there will your heart be also.”⁸ The rich young man's treasure lay in his earthly possessions. As a result, the center of his being, his heart, identified not with God but ultimately with his stuff. This false sense of identity kept the rich young man from following Christ! It probably also kept him from living a fulfilled life.

On the other hand, the story of a Mary is the story of a woman who gained an even deeper sense of her identity precisely because she said “yes” to God's will in her life. Mary was a relatively poor woman. She did not identify with her possessions, and her freedom from a false sense of identity allowed her to encounter Christ in a radical way. Mary's “yes” ultimately deepened her own sense of identity as a child of God. In contrast to the rich man's false identity, which made his life a boring sort of slavery, Mary's true sense of identity became an occasion for her to more deeply realize her own greatness!

⁸ Matthew 6:21

The Preferential Option for the Poor

We all have a little bit of both the Blessed Virgin and the rich young man inside of us. The question is, how do we become more like Mary and less like the rich young man? Saint Thomas Aquinas tells us that pride is the doorway to all sin and humility the gate to all virtue, so the question could not be more important. How do we get on the right track? How do we avoid pride and cultivate humility? There are many answers to this question, but Catholic Social Teaching recommends the poor as a sure route to Christian humility. This leads us to another principle of Catholic Social Teaching: the Preferential Option for the Poor.

We all want to build a better world, and we all want to be holy. The Lord calls us to do these things in different ways; but regardless of our specific vocation, career, or interests, a love for the poor is an essential element of the Christian life. Why? Because it is so easy to neglect the poor.

In the first chapter of this study, for example, we learned about the Universal Destination of Goods. Unfortunately, in our application of this principle, we regularly forget about the poor. In the words of John Paul II: “The principle of the Universal Destination of Goods requires that the poor, the marginalized and in all cases those whose living conditions interfere with their proper growth should be the focus of a particular concern.”⁹ John Paul II is saying that, as Christians, we ought to have a special love and devotion to the poor. The poor should be on the forefront of our minds. In a certain sense, we ought to have a **preference** for the poor. After all, the Gospels seem to show that Christ Himself had a special love for the poor. Furthermore, since

⁹ Cf. John Paul II, “Address to the Third General Conference of Latin American Bishops, Puebla, Mexico” (28 January 1979), I/8: AAS 71 (1979), 194 – 195.

the world already has a tendency to mistreat and abuse the poor, it makes sense that the Church would encourage Christians to right this wrong.

Before we go any further, let's take a moment to correct some misconceptions about the Church and the poor — namely, let's make sure we understand what the Church is *not* saying. The Church does not say that material possessions are bad. Quite the opposite is the case. In fact, as we saw in a previous chapter of this study, the Church affirms the Right to Private Property and the goodness of material creation. Further, the Church does not say that a poor person is categorically better than a wealthy person. On the contrary, the Church affirms the equality of all people. And finally, the Church does not say that poor people should remain destitute. In fact, the Church encourages Christians to work towards the alleviation of poverty. In short, the fact that the Church encourages us to encounter the poor does not mean that we shouldn't help the poor out of poverty.

So why does the Church teach the Preferential Option for the Poor? Well, perhaps the most fundamental reason concerns Christ himself. It seems evident in the Gospels that Jesus chose a certain simplicity of life and that the poor had a special place in his heart. Thus, since Christians are called to imitate Christ, it seems we should prefer the poor as well.

In addition to Christ's example, there is another reason to prefer the poor: identity. In the first two sections of this chapter, we spoke of Mary's sense of identity. We then contrasted Mary with the rich young man. If we desire to live out our identity as Mary lived out her identity, the poor help. The poor can teach us about ourselves, but for that we must encounter them. That is, we must learn to see the poor as they really are: beloved children of God. Let's go back to Scripture:

“When the Son of Man comes in his glory, and all the angels with him, he will sit upon his glorious throne, and all the nations will be assembled before him. And he will separate them one from another, as a shepherd separates the sheep from the goats. He will place the sheep on his right and the goats on his left. Then the king will say to those on his right, “Come, you who are blessed by my Father. Inherit the kingdom prepared for you from the foundation of the world. For I was hungry and you gave me food, I was thirsty and you gave me drink, a stranger and you welcomed me, naked and you clothed me, ill and you cared for me, in prison and you visited me.” Then the righteous will answer him and say, “Lord, when did we see you hungry and feed you, or thirsty and give you drink? When did we see you a stranger and welcome you, or naked and clothe you? When did we see you ill or in prison, and visit you?” And the king will say to them in reply, “Amen, I say to you, whatever you did for one of these least brothers of mine, you did for me.” Then he will say to those on his left, “Depart from me, you accursed, into the eternal fire prepared for the devil and his angels. For I was hungry and you gave me no food, I was thirsty and you gave me no drink, a stranger and you gave me no welcome, naked and you gave me no clothing, ill and in prison, and you did not care for me.” Then they will answer and say, “Lord, when did we see you hungry or thirsty or a stranger or naked or ill or in prison, and not minister to your needs?” He will answer them, “Amen, I say to you, what you did not do for one of these least ones, you did not do for me.” And these will go off to eternal punishment, but the righteous to eternal life.”¹⁰

This is a challenging Scripture passage. It clearly shows that serving the poor is not an option in the Christian life; it's a requirement. Whether we serve the materially poor, spiritually poor or those who struggle with some other kind of poverty, we must serve the poor.

¹⁰ Matthew 25:31 – 46

Whenever we love the poor, according to this Scripture passage, we are loving Christ. Whatever we do for the poor, we do for Christ.

Perhaps, though, the greatest reason for us to serve the poor is not about what we can do for them, but rather what the poor can do for us. The poor can teach us something about our own identity.

The above Scripture passage stresses the importance of an encounter with the poor. It's clear that the poor have something to gain from us — material possessions, sustenance, education, etc. — but what do we have to gain from the poor? Let's remember the contrast we drew between the Virgin Mary and the rich young man. Remember that the rich young man was kept from following Christ because *he had many possessions*. The rich young man was weighed down by his "stuff." He placed his identity in his things, and in the end, it was slavery to material possessions that kept the rich young man from following Christ.

Now, to a certain extent, we can all be like the rich young man. Just as the rich young man placed his value in things, we all have false idols and false identities into which we invest our value and our identity, whether it be success, popularity, money, etc. To rid ourselves of those idols, it can be helpful to encounter those who lack them. In this way, it can be very helpful to encounter the poor.

The poor understand their *dependence* on God. As human beings, we are prone to thinking we are sufficient in ourselves, that we do not need any help from anyone — even God! But the poor are less prone to this error. The poor know that they are dependent and are less likely to put their stock in things. They are less likely to *identify* with material possessions and/or earthly success. In this way, the poor are *empty* like Mary. And like Mary, they are *receptive* to God's will in their

lives. In sum, the material dependence and receptivity of the poor ought to remind us of our utter dependence and receptivity on God. What the poor experience in terms of material possessions ought to be a guide for how we should act in the spiritual life.

In this way, an encounter with the poor is an opportunity to grow in holiness. So next time you're serving the poor, ask yourself some questions: How can I learn to be like Mary as I serve? In what ways does my heart resemble the heart of the rich young man? What is holding me back from the freedom to follow Christ? In what am I placing my identity? How can the poor teach me to be empty before God? Remember, there is a little bit of the rich young man in each of us, but through the poor, perhaps we can learn to be more like Mary!

DISCUSSION

DISCUSSION GUIDE FOR YOUR BIBLE STUDY

Section 1: A Simple Young Woman

1. Opener: Not counting the Person of Christ, who would you consider to be the greatest person in human history?

Response: The Blessed Virgin Mary. See first paragraph of discussion guide.

Note to leader: please read aloud.

Despite being such an incredible person with such an extraordinary life, the Virgin Mary was humble. Today I would like us to focus on Mary's humility.

(Read: Luke 1:26 – 29.)

2. What strikes you about this passage?

Response: After the angel greets Mary, referring to her as “full of grace,” Mary is taken aback. Luke says she is “deeply troubled” at the angel's greeting. This reaction attests to her humility. Mary was not one to want the spotlight. And “full of grace” — what a lofty

title! Why on earth would an angel be referring to Mary in this way? Humility characterizes Mary's response. Mary was an unknown girl, insignificant in the eyes of the world, but her status did not stop God from choosing her as the mother of His only Son. In fact, it may have been Mary's humility which allowed her to accept such a great mission. Pope St. John Paul II said that Mary's presence against the rest of Israel was "a presence so discreet as to pass almost unnoticed by the eyes of her contemporaries."¹ At the time of the Annunciation, Mary was a mere teenager with no social standing whatsoever.

(Read: Luke 1:30 – 33.)

3. What do you think it would have been like to receive this news?

Discuss: Mary's life has been forever changed. One minute she is an insignificant Hebrew girl. The next instant she is the Mother of God. Think about how quickly this happened. Imagine if this had happened to you! And the image given to us in the Gospel of Luke is one of calm, peaceful acceptance. Amazing!

Note to leader: Please read aloud.

After Mary receives this news, she asked, "How can this be, since I have no husband?" To this, the angel responds:

"The angel answered, 'The Holy Spirit will come upon you, and the power of the most high will overshadow you; therefore, the child to be born will be called holy, the Son of God. And behold, your kinswoman Elizabeth in her old age has also conceived a son; and this is the sixth month with her who was called barren. For with God nothing will be impossible.'"²

¹ John Paul II. *Redemptoris Mater*. 3.

² Luke 1:35 – 38

4. How does Mary respond to the angel?

Response: Luke 1:38 records Mary's response: "Behold, I am the handmaiden of the Lord; let it be to me according to your word."

5. What strikes you about Mary's response?

Response: Mary's humility allowed her to become great. Her radical *receptivity to God's plan allowed her to realize her own identity. You might say Mary possessed a humble emptiness, an emptiness which she would only allow God to fill! She did not allow herself to be filled with the false promises of wealth, fame or power. Instead, she humbly waited for God to do His work. Once He did, Mary gained not only an awe-inspiring sense of God's mercy, but also a deep appreciation of her own identity and calling. Mary's littleness became a road through which God showed the world her greatness. This is evidenced just a little bit later in Scripture when Mary wonders at the works that God has done in her, things which would not have happened if she had not been humble: "And Mary said: 'My soul magnifies the Lord, and my spirit rejoices in God my Savior, for he has regarded the low estate of his handmaiden. For behold, henceforth all generations will call me blessed; for he who is mighty has done great things for me, and holy is his name.'"*³

Section 2: A Rich Young Man

Note to leader: Please read aloud.

Mary refers to herself as the "handmaiden" of the Lord. She knew that she was not going to do anything without Christ, so what did she do? Mary courageously and humbly said "yes" to Christ, allowing Him to

³ Luke 1:46 – 49

change her life and the entire world forever. Mary's humble "yes" was adventurous — it set her on a journey which would engulf the rest of her life and transform the world. But Mary was not the only person in Scripture who was asked by the Lord to go on mission. In fact, Mary's response was very different from the response of another person described in Matthew's Gospel as the "rich young man." By way of contrast, let's take a look at that story.

(Read: Matthew 19:16 – 22.)

6. Why did the rich young man say "no" to Christ?

Response: He was too attached to his possessions. The rich young man's slavery to his possessions rendered him incapable of accepting an adventurous life of discipleship.

7. How would you describe the differences between Mary's response to the angel Gabriel and the rich young man's response to Christ?

Response: It appears that Mary and the rich young man possess a fundamentally different sense of self or identity. A person's actions often flow from their identity, and the difference in identity might be the most fundamental difference at play here. Notice how the rich young man's words talk about his works ("I have done all this since my youth") and his things ("he had many possessions"). This evidences that the young man's identity is wrapped up with his stuff and actions. This is very different from Mary's response: "I AM the handmaiden of the Lord; let it be done to me according to your word." Mary's response shows a deep and true sense of self. Unlike the rich young man, Mary's identity does not lie in things or actions. It lies in her relationship with the Lord, and her mission is not something

Discussion / Mary and the Preferential Option for the Poor

that she takes on herself; rather, it is something which she receives from the Lord. Mary's receptive identity allows her to enter into an incredible mission with the Father, whereas the young man's flawed sense of identity keeps him from this adventure.

8. In your own life, are there ways you are tempted to respond to God's call with fear or sadness about what you would have to give up? In what ways is God inviting you to a humble "yes" like Mary's?

Response: Discuss.

Section 3: The Preferential Option for the Poor

Note to leader: please read aloud.

Unlike the Virgin Mary, none of us is perfect. We all have a little "rich young man" inside of us. We are all working to perfect our sense of identity. We are all trying to bridge the gap between the rich young man and the Blessed Virgin. In conclusion, we are going to talk about another principle of Catholic Social Teaching: the Preferential Option for the Poor. To understand this principle, we are going to read one more Scripture passage. This passage is referred to as the "Judgement of the Nations."

(Read: Matthew 25:31 – 46.)

9. According to this Scripture passage, how important would you say it is that Christians serve the poor?

Response: This is obviously a rhetorical question, but encourage your group to discuss. This is a critically important question.

Note to leader: please read aloud.

Just like this Scripture passage says, the Church affirms the importance of caring for the poor. It's an essential aspect of the Christian life. In the words of John Paul II: "The principle of the universal destination of goods requires that the poor, the marginalized and in all cases those whose living conditions interfere with their proper growth should be the focus of a particular concern."⁴ What John Paul II is saying is that, as Christians, we ought to have a special love and devotion to the poor. In a certain sense, we ought to have a *preference* for the poor. After all, the Gospels seem to show that Christ Himself had a special love for the poor. Furthermore, since the world already has a tendency to mistreat and abuse the poor, it makes sense that the Church would encourage Christians to right this wrong!

10. Why do you think the Church says it is important that we serve the poor?

Response: There are a lot of reasons why we should serve the poor. Today we are going to talk about one especially important reason: identity. Earlier in this Bible study, we contrasted the responses of Mary and the rich young man. An encounter with the poor is oftentimes a bridge which can transport your identity from the rich young man to the Blessed Virgin Mary. Think about it: The poor have nothing, and yet many of them are happier than us, who have so much. They are less likely to place their identity in wealth, fame or power. While the poor may be enslaved by poverty, they are not subject to the slavery of vanity and material possessions. For this reason, the poor are more able to be like Mary in their response to God! When we encounter the poor, we are better able to see and rid ourselves of our own slavery!

⁴ Cf. John Paul II, "Address to the Third General Conference of Latin American Bishops, Puebla, Mexico" (28 January 1979), *1/8: AAS 71 (1979)*, 194 – 195.

Discussion / Mary and the Preferential Option for the Poor

11. Have you ever worked with the poor? If so, what was it like? Did you have a heart more like Mary's, or more like the rich young man's?

Response: Discuss.

12. What are some ways you could incorporate service of the poor more regularly into your life? How might this change your spiritual life?

Response: Discuss.

