



Chapter 08

Mary & Charity

Understanding / For your preparation as a leader / Page 196 - 207
Discussion / To use with your group / Page 210- 217

UNDERSTANDING

What do I need to know about this passage?

Few would expect a young woman without wealth, status or power to become the most influential human person the world has ever known. Her visible accomplishments amounted to becoming the wife of a humble tradesman and the mother of a son. How did a life so small by worldly standards become so universally venerated? How could she say, “[A]ll generations will call me blessed”? (Lk 1:48). Yet, two-thousand years later, we can see that she was right: Mary of Nazareth is the most revered and beloved woman ever to live.

Mary’s greatness, however, is not found in talent, status, or achievement, but in a life animated by something supernatural—the theological virtue of charity. Closeness with God, knowing Him and living in union with Him, was her deepest desire. When God invited Mary to participate in the greatest event in human history by becoming the mother of His Son, she offered her total and complete yes, choosing and loving God above all else. Her decision did not bring her status, security,

Notes

or ease. Instead, it ultimately led into sharing in the suffering of her Son as a woman of sorrows. And yet, through her self-giving love, God raised her up to become the model of perfect charity.

Pope Benedict XVI said,

“Being Christian is not the result of an ethical choice or a lofty idea, but the encounter with an event, a person, which gives life a new horizon and a decisive direction.” Many of us recognize that life’s ultimate purpose is to love and be loved. When we fall in love with others, our lives become brighter. We long to spend time with them, get to know them, and sacrifice ourselves for their well-being. In turn, we hope that others will do the same for us. But even more excellent, is becoming enamored with God—encountering Him, knowing Him, and giving everything to unite ourselves to Him.

The virtue of charity elevates our human love with divine love. And Mary is the perfect model of charity, because she loved God—the fulfillment of all her desires—so deeply that His love penetrated every aspect of her life. As we enter

Notes

Mary's story, we learn not only what charity is, but also how to follow her example and live it well.

Mary

The Church teaches that, to fulfill her role as mother of the savior, Mary was “wholly borne by God's grace” (CCC 490). Redeemed from the moment of her conception, Mary led a sinless life. Therefore, she offers us a comprehensive vision of what it looks to live in union with God, animated by the fullness of charity. Let's explore two key moments in Mary's life, the Annunciation and the Crucifixion, to understand Mary's charity, and learn how we too can reach the heights of divine love through the power of the Holy Spirit.

The Annunciation

Mary is, likely, about fourteen years old. On an ordinary day, the angel Gabriel appears to her proclaiming, “Hail, full of grace. The Lord is with you” (Lk 1:28). Mary is shocked and frightened at the angel's greeting, but Gabriel explains, “Do not be afraid, Mary, for you have found favor with God. And now, you will conceive in your womb and bear a son, and you will name him Jesus” (Lk 1:30–31).

Imagine being in Mary's position. God is inviting her to become the preeminent woman in His plan of salvation. She does not completely understand how it will work, or how her life will be affected.

Notes

But Mary put God first in her life. She wanted to pursue Him and His plan for her life, rather than her own. She was so in tune with her desire for God, and so desired His will to be accomplished, that a resounding “yes” flows out of her. With total trust and surrender, she consents, “Behold, I am the handmaid of the Lord. May it be done to me according to your word” (Lk 1:38 NABRE).

At the moment of Mary's yes, the Holy Spirit fills her, and the word of God literally takes shape in her womb. Her life instantly takes on new meaning. Filled with charity, she willingly endures the complications that arise from her unique vocation. We can think of her “yes” at the Annunciation as an image of the “yes” that permeated her entire existence. Mary's “fiat,” with all its joy and suffering, reveals the nature of charity. Each step of her obedience was made not for reward or personal benefit, but for love of God Himself. Closeness with God was her heart's desire. Everything else was secondary.

What about you? Is each choice you make a loving “Yes” to God? Do you desire God above all else? Are you interested in His plan for your life, even more than your own? Does your eagerness to draw close to God, to be with Him, permeate the way you live your life? Loving God with total surrender is never easy in this broken

Notes

world, but Mary shows us that with the help of God's grace, we can truly love, even when it seems impossible by mere human standards, for "with God nothing will be impossible" (Lk 1:37).

The Crucifixion

As Mary watches her son grow, the virtue of charity—her union with God and desire for Him—grows also. She sees Jesus begin His public ministry, preach, and perform miracles. She also sees the Jewish authorities begin to plot against Him. And in His final hours, Mary faithfully fulfills the demands of true love. Though almost everyone abandoned Him, Mary never did. Just as divine love compelled her to say "yes," when she received Jesus into her womb, her charity kept her united to Jesus throughout His suffering and death.

As Jesus progresses through His passion, Mary stays with Him, firmly united to Him in His suffering. She watches as He is scourged and crowned with thorns, unable to wipe His blood away or treat His wounds. She sorrowfully beholds Jesus fall repeatedly and struggle to get up. As the guards nail her innocent Son to a criminal's cross, a sword pierces her own heart just as Simeon said it would (Lk 2:35). Finally, Mary watches the blood flow from Jesus' body as He hangs on the cross until he finally expires.

Notes

The baby she had once held in swaddling clothes is now the man she is holding in a burial cloth. Yet even amid overwhelming sorrow—the most difficult moment of her life—supernatural love fills her. Divine love had been the foundation of Mary's entire life. Therefore, staying, enduring, and fulfilling love's demand was her natural response. It's who she had become. Love enables her—under unthinkable circumstances—to "remain in me" by following Jesus all the way to the cross (Jn 15:4). She "faithfully persevered in her union with her Son unto the cross...and lovingly consenting to the immolation of this Victim which she herself had brought forth."

Are we willing to love Christ so deeply that we will remain united with Him, even to the point of remaining with Him while enduring our heaviest crosses? Mary's example is a challenge and an inspiration for us to continue loving, even when it is difficult and demands great sacrifice. And while none of us are perfect like Mary, through God's grace and the power of the Holy Spirit, we have the virtue of charity infused into our hearts, making loving like Mary a real possibility in our lives too. To better understand how to live like this, let's explore the virtue of charity more deeply.

Notes

Charity

Charity “is the theological virtue by which we love God above all things for his own sake, and our neighbor as ourselves for the love of God” (CCC 1822). (1 Cor 13:7). St. Thomas Aquinas defines natural human love as, “to will the good of the other” (CCC 1766). The theological virtue of charity, however, goes beyond our natural human loves.

Christ tells us, “A new commandment I give to you, that you love one another; even as I have loved you, that you also love one another” (Jn 14:34). This commandment is new because it invites us not only to love, but to love as Jesus did. That means giving like Him, serving like Him, being humble, just, and patient like Him. It means living with Jesus’s kindness, compassion, and purity, completely radiating His love to the world.

Does this sound impossible? The virtue of Charity is not something we achieve on our own. It is infused into us through the power of the Holy Spirit because, “God’s love has been poured into our hearts through the Holy Spirit who has been given to us” (Rom 5:5). This divine love “upholds and purifies our human ability to love, and raises it to the supernatural perfection of divine love” (CCC 1827). Amazingly, as simple human beings, we can become capable of loving with divine love.

Notes

Charity is the pinnacle of all virtues. St. Paul tells us, “If I...have not love...I am nothing. If I give away all I have...but have not love, I gain nothing” (1 Cor 13:1-3). As Christians, we may have many virtues, but if these virtues are not animated by love, then something is missing. Charity “binds everything together in perfect harmony” (Col 3:14). It inspires and perfects the other virtues, ordering them toward God. The charitable man follows Christ’s commandments out of love, not as a slave doing their master’s bidding but as a child responding to Him who “first loved us” (1 Jn 4:19). He treats others justly because he loves God. He makes prudent decisions because he love God. He remains faithful because he loves God. His life proves that “Love is itself the fulfillment of all our works” (CCC 108).

Mary models this love for us, because she shows how to live charity in our humanity. 1 Corinthians 3:4-7 says, “Love is patient and kind; love is not jealous or boastful; it is not arrogant or rude. Love does not insist on its own way; it is not irritable or resentful; it does not rejoice at wrong, but rejoices in the right. Love bears all things, believes all things, hopes all things, endures all things.” Mary’s life—even amid confusion, suffering, and darkness—revealed these aspects of charity. Imagine, as His mother, watching Jesus be misunderstood, and even called the devil himself. What kind of patience and forgiveness did she have to exercise?

Notes

Consider her own ideas of what it would be like to raise the Son of God, the sweetness and peace she possibly imagined. How did she let go of her own preferences so He could sacrifice Himself for all of us? How would she have had to shower the Apostles with kindness and hope, even when she also did not understand God's plan? Mary's life was not so different from ours. It was mixed with joy and happiness as well as intense suffering and confusion. But Mary fully united herself to God, and He enabled her to bear all things, believe all things, hope all things, and endure all things: "by her complete adherence to the Father's will, to his Son's redemptive work, and to every prompting of the Holy Spirit, the Virgin Mary is the Church's model of faith and charity" (CCC 967).

What could charity look like in our lives? Unlike Mary, we were born with the wound of original sin. And yet, as baptized Christ, we too possess the indwelling of the Holy Spirit, making us capable of Christ-like charity. There are infinite ways that we can love. It may look like listening with patience when we would rather interrupt, resisting gossip, or extending grace to difficult coworkers or family members. It may look like choosing to go about our daily, mundane tasks with the intention of offering them to God as acts of love. Or it may look like surrendering all that we are and all that we have for the sake of Christ.

Notes

As Christians, love is our chief aim, the virtue with which we want our entire lives to be permeated. As St. Thérèse of Lisieux said, "Miss no single opportunity of making some small sacrifice, here by a smiling look, there by a kindly word; always doing the smallest right and doing it all for love."

Application: Heroic Generosity

In our culture, generosity is held up as a virtue—but sometimes only after we have achieved all our personal hopes and dreams. We receive the message that we should first take care of ourselves, build our future, and achieve a certain amount of wealth or self-actualization. Only after doing these things, out of our abundance, should we "give back," sharing our leftovers instead of our "first fruits." But charity demands that we become extravagantly generous—whether we have great wealth and have achieved all our dreams or not. St. Mother Teresa echoed this idea when she said, "Love to be real, it must cost — it must hurt — it must empty us of self."

The generosity we are called to as Christians is heroic. The idea of heroic virtue comes from the process of canonizing saints, in which the Church proclaims that certain men and women "practiced heroic virtue and lived in fidelity to God's grace" (CCC 828). Yet heroic virtue isn't merely for the exceptional. Ordinary Christians,

Notes

all followers of Christ, are called to the heights of holiness, to heroic virtue. Therefore, beyond merely the ordinary practice of generosity, Christian charity involves exercising generosity to a supreme degree, it involves heroic generosity.

This is exactly what we see in Mary. She held nothing back from God. Her whole life was a generous gift back to the Father. That kind of heroic generosity is what we need from Christians today as well. And here's the great news: the Church tells us that man "cannot fully find himself except through a sincere gift of himself." It is precisely when we give ourselves away, when we are willing to dedicate our lives to Christ and His Kingdom that we find what we are looking for and become who we are meant to be.

We can call this the "law of self-gift." In giving everything to Christ, Mary became the woman God destined her to become. By participating in Christ's total self-offering, she found her ultimate fulfillment in being "Mother of Christ, Mother of the Church" (CCC 963). We too can become who we are meant to be and find the fulfillment we are longing for when we choose to give our lives to God in love. When we give of ourselves to Christ, to His mission, and to others, we lose nothing. Instead, our lives are deeply enriched, and we gain so much more. God reminds us that whatever we give, will be

Notes

given back to us "pressed down, shaken together, running over" (Lk 6:38). And so, trusting and loving Him, He calls us to be heroically generous with our entire lives, laying everything at His disposal.

What does this look like? It resembles Mary's constant "yes." We echo her words, "Be it done to me, according to your word," every day, surrendering every part of our lives to Him. This might mean putting other people's needs before ours. It may mean giving away more money than what feels comfortable. It may require us to place our spouse's and loved one's needs above our own. It might mean having more children. It may mean changing the career we have, the vocation we pursue, or our daily schedule. And it may mean continuing to say "yes" to God in love, even when it seems like He is asking too much of us or when we feel weak, incompetent, too small, or too sinful.

Mary's example encourages us to reach for the heights of love. Through the power of the Holy Spirit, we can live with heroic generosity. In Mary, God has not only given us a model, but He has also given us a mother, advocate, and intercessor. At any moment we can ask for her intercession to aid us in our quest to become people of Christ-like charity.

Notes

DISCUSSION

Luke 1:26–36
John 19:17–30

Discussion guide for your Bible study

01. Launching Question: Have you ever loved someone, even at the cost of your own reputation, ambition, preferences, or future?

Please read aloud:

Many of us recognize that life's ultimate purpose is to love and be loved. But how many of us would sacrifice everything—reputation, ambition, preferences, comfort—to truly love God and other people?

Give a brief introduction to the theological virtue of charity (also called love, “The virtue by which we love God above all things for his own sake, and our neighbor as ourselves for the love of God,” not a feeling but a decision). Refer to CCC 1822–1818.

02. Write an understanding question about the nature of true love, revealing how this virtue is different than how it is often explained in our culture.

Notes

Please read aloud:

From an obscure town in the middle of nowhere, there is a woman neither wealthy, nor highly educated, nor well known. Her visible accomplishments amount to becoming the wife of a carpenter and the mother of a son. And yet, two thousand years after she lived, she is revered as one of the most beloved, influential, and powerful women who has ever lived. Her name is Mary of Nazareth.

How did a life so small by the world's standards become so universally venerated? How is she the one who can say, “[A]ll generations will call me blessed?” (Lk 1:48).

Mary's greatness is not found in talent, status, or achievement, but in perfect love or charity—the pinnacle of all virtues. As we enter Mary's story, we learn not only what charity is, but how to follow her example and live it well.

Read Luke 1:26–36

03. What does the angel propose to Mary? What is Mary's response?

Answer: The angel proposes that she become the mother of the Messiah. After asking a clarifying question, she responds with total trust and generosity,

Notes

proclaiming herself the handmaid of the Lord.

Please read aloud:

Mary was so in tune with her desire for God, and so desired His will to be accomplished, that a resounding “yes” flows out of her, no matter the cost. Closeness with God was her heart’s desire. Everything else was secondary.

04. Do you have a similar desire to be close to God and do His will? Why or why not?

Allow the group to discuss.

Please read aloud:

Charity is the virtue that “binds everything together in perfect harmony” (Col 3:14). Love inspires and perfects the other virtues, ordering them toward God. Through charity, we follow Christ’s commandments out of love, not as slaves doing their master’s bidding but as children responding to Him who “first loved us” (1 Jn 4:19).

05. How does Mary show us that charity binds together all the other virtues in harmony? How does love imbue all of Mary’s actions?

Allow the group to discuss.

Possible Answer: Everything Mary did was motivated by love. Each step, each suffering,

Notes

each little act of virtue was made not for any reward or personal benefit, but because of her love for God. Grounded in perfect love, the “yes” she made at the Annunciation echoes through her entire life as she bears every trial and suffering with loving acceptance.

Please read aloud:

Love is never easy in this broken world, but Mary shows us that with the help of God’s grace, we can love, even when it seems impossible by mere human standards, for “with God nothing will be impossible” (Lk 1:37).

06. Are your daily actions animated by a loving “Yes” to God? What about when you are tired, angry, or misunderstood? What about when the task you are supposed to perform seems impossible?

Allow the group to discuss.

Please read aloud:

Charity may look like listening with patience when we would rather interrupt, resisting gossip, or extending grace to difficult coworkers or family members. It may look like choosing to go about our daily, mundane tasks with the intention of offering them to God as acts of love. Or it may look like surrendering all that we are and all that we have for the sake of Christ.

Notes

Similarly, Mary's daily, often mundane, "yesses" to the Lord culminate in the dramatic passion of her son.

Read John 19:17-30

07. What is Mary doing while her son dies?
What do you think this experience was like for her?

Allow the group to discuss.

Answer: Mary stands beneath Jesus under the cross. Surely, she is engulfed in sorrow, and a sword pierces her own heart just as Simeon said it would (Lk 2:35).

(Optional) Write an additional observation or understanding question about Mary's presence at Jesus's crucifixion.

08. We know that charity consists in "[loving] God above all things for his own sake, and our neighbor as ourselves for the love of God" (CCC 1822). What do we learn about Mary's love in these moments?

Allow the group to discuss.

Possible Answer: Divine love was the foundation of Mary's entire life. Therefore,

Notes

staying, enduring, and fulfilling love's demand was her natural response. It's who she had become. Love enables her—under unthinkable circumstances—to "remain in me" by following Jesus all the way to the cross (Jn 15:4). She "faithfully persevered in her union with her Son unto the cross...and lovingly consenting to the immolation of this Victim which she herself had brought forth."

09. Are you willing to love Christ so deeply that you will remain united with Him, even to the point of remaining with Him while enduring your heaviest crosses? What might this look like?

Allow the group to discuss.

Please read aloud:

Beyond merely the ordinary practice of generosity, Christian charity involves exercising generosity to a supreme degree, it involves heroic generosity. This is exactly what we see in Mary. She held nothing back from God. Her whole life was a generous gift back to the Father. That kind of heroic generosity is what we need from Christians today as well. And here's the great news: the Church tells us that man "cannot fully find himself except through a sincere gift of himself." It is precisely when we give ourselves away, when we are willing to dedicate our lives to Christ and

Notes

His Kingdom that we find what we are looking for and become who we are meant to be.

10. How would giving yourself more generously to Christ make your life better, fuller, and happier?

Allow the group to discuss.

11. What might heroic generosity look like practically in your life? Where are some places where you could love more generously?

Allow the group to discuss.

Possible Answers: It might mean putting other people's needs before ours, giving away more money than what feels comfortable, placing our spouse's and loved one's needs above our own. It might mean making sacrifices to have more children. It could change the career we have, the vocation we pursue, or affect how we set up our daily schedule. And it may mean continuing to say "yes" to God in love, even when it seems like He is asking too much of us or when we feel weak, incompetent, too small, or too sinful.

12. Christ tells us, "A new commandment I give to you, that you love one another;

Notes

even as I have loved you, that you also love one another" (Jn 14:34). This commandment is new because it invites us not only to love, but to love as Jesus did. Amazingly, through the power of God's grace, we can truly love in this supernatural way. Now that we have explored the meaning of true charity, what graces do you need to ask for to be able to love as He loved us?

Allow the group to discuss.

Please read aloud:

Mary's example encourages us to reach the heights of love. Through the power of the Holy Spirit, and God's grace we can live with heroic generosity. In Mary, God has not only given us a model, but He has also given us a mother, advocate, and intercessor. At any moment we can ask for her intercession to aid us in our quest to become people of Christlike charity.

13. This is the last chapter of the Bible study. Write an understanding or application question that brings together the various topics discussed throughout the entire study.

Notes