

THE BVM – The Voyage Homeward

Sometimes in the early morning, when the wind has shifted around to the North or to the Northwest, the sky is so blue and the air is so clear that it can seem like perfectly glazed porcelain or the wondrous shell of a robin's egg. Sometimes the brightening heavens loom like an unblemished, pristine pane of glass. Like a pure, untainted, almost crystalline perfection that, if I were to flick my weary finger at it, would come tumbling and raining down, in a gentle shower of both beauty and wistfulness. It is as if such flawlessness is never meant to last forever; rather, it arrives among us, unexpected and unplanned, and we breathe it in and we hold fast to it all - desperately even - though we soon realize yet again that such perfection is, by its very nature, but a passing thing.

Still, when I sit there, wherever I am, by the pond, on the stoop, in my driveway, peeking out of my car, my deepest instinct is to want to hold on and to hold fast, forever. To never let go. Something in that mystic morning air and unexpected clarity, a precision which is beyond words, draws me back to the hopes and ideals of my youth. To the dream of an open road. Of a lifetime still to come with promise and possibility, even while heartache and uncertainty are forever part of this bargain.

But what I discover, when I go deeper, when I really reflect on and feel utterly undone by the inevitably passing wonder and beauty of such moments, is that my heart is longing for certainty. Some certainty. Any certainty. Some thing, some one, some essence that holds it all together across time and the seasons, across generations who have gone before and those yet to be born, across the vigor and optimism of my younger years and the aches and wisdom and successes and failures, and yes, the worries of my present age.

In the “big picture”, at least for me, almost nothing that I once thought to be “forever” or to be “unchanging” has turned out that way. That is a good, if hard, life lesson by which I am begrudgingly blessed. But still and all, across my 62 or so years, (and maybe your years as well), the comfort and the balm and the soul-salvation that *does* come when we sweep away the dust and the dross and re-discover the very essence and the beating heart of what truly matters and why we even get up each day - that is eternal. It is, in its way, the very essence of salvation itself. And for me, as you have no doubt figured out by now, Mary is at the very heart, the very essence, the very core of this; Mary is the very comfort to which I return and toward whom I strive. In the first part of this reflection on Mary I pondered whether I was running away from something or running towards something; and the trick answer, of course, is that I was doing “both”. Running away from darkness, fear, loneliness, heartache and tears, and running toward the one who was everywhere I looked, around every corner I turned, down every crooked and winding path I took, awaiting me at every resting spot or juncture on this tender road of life.

I use the word “strive” on purpose, because for me not only is that what I do, but if you look at Mary, that is what and how she invites. Open arms. ‘Come to me. I’m here, make your way to my comfort.’ Not arms uplifted in judgment, not arms dividing any sort of sheep and goats, not arms blocking or diverting my way, not arms of Popeye muscle or Jeremiad winnowing, not arms of seizure or control, but arms and hands that simply say and that forever beckon: “Come here, Come to me, come Home.”

To the lost, sad, hurting schoolboy: “Come to me.”

To the confused college graduate, in a rapidly shifting world: “Come to me.”

To the exhausted, clueless, overwhelmed Father of babies: “Come to me.”

To the psych worker, in a universe of indescribable pain and suffering: “Come to me.”

To the helpless, middle aged son of a dying Dad: “Come to me.”

To the faithful and struggling Priest, amid many a dark night of the soul: “Come to me.”

And most of all, and always, to the lonely boy and to the forlorn man who simply longed to be known, accepted, cared for, loved and seen, and held in grace: “Come to me.”

And there she was. Always. There was Mary. Open arms. In a million different places and in too many ways to number, and she always welcomed me in, welcomed me to a precious home. Held me. Consoled me. Reassured me. Proved for me the old mystery, and revealed for me the ancient truth, that faith really is *“the assurance of things hoped for, the conviction of things not seen.”*

[Heb. 11:1] Then as now, and always, Mary never said ‘no.’

Like many of you during these past, difficult months of isolation, quarantine, and lock down, I have spent more time than I wish (or should) on the internet. One of the quirky sites I regularly visit is related to music, and it works this way: the person posting puts up a random “Top Hits” chart from a given day and year, and then asks anyone to reply with the first lyrics that come into their mind, from whatever song on that charts strikes them most powerfully and immediately. Last week was a chart from May of 1970. I was 13 years old, and I was obsessed with my transistor radio. The list was remarkable and poignant, but my eyes and heart went immediately to the song above all other songs, #2 that long ago week, and of course these were the lyrics which immediately came to me, and which I actually sang out loud as I was typing:

*“When I find myself in times of trouble
Mother Mary comes to me
Speaking words of wisdom, let it be;
And in my hour of darkness
She is standing right in front of me
Speaking words of wisdom, let it be...”
(‘Let It Be.’ c. Lennon/McCartney 1969)*

Even then, as a lost and confused teenager, Mary was in my life in a way I scarcely understood, if at all. Even now, 50 years later, the words come back to me as if I am hearing the tune for the first time, walking my solitary paper route, through the lonely town I grew up in yet never really knew and still don't understand. Ear pressed to WRKO AM 680, 'all hits, all the time.' And there is Mary - here is Mary - still abiding, still alongside me, still a part of me, not least "*in my hour of darkness, she is standing right in front of me. Speaking words of wisdom...let it be.*"

And in the end, or at least the earthly end, or perhaps most prosaically my own end, my time of death, whenever it shall arrive for me and knock with certainty on my winter door, it is Mary I most imagine seeing. It is Mary on the journey alongside me. It is Mary who I imagine holding me, comforting me, consoling me, like the Mary of the Pieta, or, just as truly, and just as genuinely, and just as full of grace and love, as the Mary - yes, the 'Mary on the Half Shell' - of all those long ago confusions and bewilderments and sarcasms and cynicisms and mysteries.

I know who awaits me on the other side of that River Jordan, but it will be Mary who will guide me there. It is Mary who will console me along the path. It is Mary who will assure my safe passage and delivery. Because Mary "gets it", and as it turns out, and even though it has taken me the better part of a lifetime to really understand this, Mary "gets" me.

She is a blessing beyond words, and a comfort for my every moment.

~ Amen.

~ End of Part 2 ~