

November 14, 2010
Saint Philip the Apostle

Father Pat's Pastoral Ponderings

It is surely significant that the evangelist Luke, affirming that "Jesus increased in wisdom," placed that affirmation immediately after a revealing comment about Mary: "His mother kept all these things in her heart" (2:51-52).

There is a subtle hint in this juxtaposition. Luke seems to imply that the sustained contemplation in Mary's heart was in some way related to her son's increase in wisdom. The author paints here a provocative picture of the home in Nazareth, where Jesus and His mother, joined in a common faith during those decades of their shared life, continued to mature spiritually in one another's company.

Given the delicacy of this subject, it is important not to sail off into speculations beyond the data provided by Holy Scripture. Does the Bible give any sign of this interpersonal growth of Jesus and His mother? As it touches their relationship--especially their shared faith in the Father's purpose and the mission of the Holy Spirit---is it possible to discern in the relevant biblical texts some indication of this spiritual development? I believe there is.

It is reasonable to begin with the only two recorded conversations between Jesus and His mother. The first, narrated by Luke (2:41-52), took place in the Temple, when Jesus was twelve years old---the incident when He was lost in Jerusalem for three days and then was found.

The second conversation, reported by John (2:1-11), happened at the wedding feast in Cana of Galilee, apparently when Jesus was about thirty years old (cf. Luke 3:23). In this story, Mary approached her son---now a mature man---with an implied request on behalf of some embarrassed newly-weds. Both stories are well known to readers of the gospels, so neither needs to be told here in detail.

Luke's source for the first story was, it would appear, Mary herself, whereas in the second instance, John mentions several witnesses, any of whom may have been his source. It is arguable, moreover, that the event at Cana was inscribed in John's personal memory (John 2:2,11). Since I propose to compare these two Gospel accounts, which describe events roughly eighteen years apart, I first mention the reliability of these first-hand sources in order to establish the factual history of the two occasions.

As we compare these two stories, it is important not to overlook a basic fact,

which, though almost too obvious at first, is a bit subtle in its significance: Each narrative comes down to us from a different author. That is to say, the elements we may find common to the two accounts are not derived from the thematic perspective of a single writer. The similarities between them, consequently, are rooted in the recollection of real historical events, not in a systematic literary presentation.

Indeed, with respect to each author's theological intent, the two stories are very different: Luke, along with his pervading and characteristic interest in the symbolism of the Temple, tells the story of finding Jesus in specific terms he will later take up in his account of the Lord's third-day Resurrection. John, on the other hand, is preoccupied with a large theological motif: the seven "signs" he uses to provide narrative structure to Jesus' public ministry. The wedding feast of Cana is the first of these signs (John 2: 11).

Notwithstanding these literary and interpretive differences, Luke's and John's stories share striking points of similarity that should prompt us to compare them:

First, each conversation between Jesus and Mary is recorded in direct address; they are both explicitly *quoted*. Luke and John provide us with at least substantial approximations of their words.

Second, in each encounter between them, Jesus asks His mother a question: "Why did you seek Me? Did you not know that I must be about the things of My Father?" and "What does your concern have to do with Me?" These questions to Mary do not function as inquiries; they are directed, rather, to *ending* the conversation, not prolonging it.

It is surely significant that Mary, neither time, answers her Son. What she *does*, however, is very different in the two cases, and, I will argue, this difference is related to their spiritual growth and understanding.

Third, both stories are told from Mary's perspective, not that of Jesus. Thus, when the twelve-year old Boy is lost in the Temple for three days, the narrator simply leaves Him there, while the story line continues with Mary and Joseph.

A parallel perspective is found the story of the wedding feast of Cana. John begins by observing, "the mother of Jesus was there." Only then does he mention, "Now both Jesus and His disciples were invited to the wedding." Likewise, the initiative in this account is taken---and then sustained---by Mary. In this first of His signs, wherein He "manifested His glory," Jesus is said to act only at His mother's initiative.

Fourth, and, I believe, most important, these two narratives share a common feature of psychology more difficult to label. I am hesitant to call it "contention," because this word often conveys a tone of belligerence or disrespect. However we name it, nonetheless, both stories---in the Temple at Jerusalem and at the wedding party in Nazareth---portray Jesus and His mother as "not agreed." They are not in harmony. The two conversations convey, between Mary and her son, a sense of initial opposition. Their questions to one another disclose a rough patch, as it were, a foothold of friction that moves the narrative forward.

To appreciate this quality, we can easily construct alternative narratives that would demonstrate the difference. Let us suppose, for instance, that when Mary asked Jesus, "Son, why have You done this to us? Look, Your father and I have sought You anxiously," He answered, "Oh, how embarrassing. Terribly sorry, I'm sure. Distracted, you understand, with these rabbinical questions, I lost all sense of time. I do promise it won't happen in the future."

Or again, when Mary mentioned, "They have no wine," let us surmise that Jesus responded, "Good heavens, I failed to notice. Thank you so much for bringing this to my attention. Let me see what can be done about the problem."

In neither conjecture, obviously, would there be much a point to the story. In other words, the patch of friction between Jesus and His mother provides the narrative foothold for the two stories to move forward.

It is in this fourth point of comparison that we observe an essential difference between the two accounts: their endings.

In the first case, when Jesus is twelve years old, his question to Mary is literally the last word in the conversation: "Did you not know that I must be about the things of My Father?" Jesus breaks off the dialogue. His question, Luke tells us, leaves Mary and Joseph confused and speechless: "But they did not understand the statement which He spoke to them."

In the later scene at Cana, however, Mary's response to her son is dramatically different: Here it is *she* who breaks off the dialogue. Mary turns away and takes resolute charge of the situation, instructing the servants, "Do whatever He tells you." It is the impulse of her action that precipitates the "beginning of signs that Jesus did." Her dramatically different response, revealing the spiritual growth of the eighteen intervening years, shows that Jesus and His mother have most surely changed . . . and so has their relationship.

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