Called to Discipleship in the Spirit of the Virgin Mary

"And Mary said, 'Behold, I am the handmaid of the Lord. May it be done to me according to your word.'" (Luke 1: 38)

If I were to ask you, "How was your day?" you might say something like, "I had a good day." "I got that promotion at work and accomplished all my tasks." "I had a miserable day." "I got stuck in traffic for the umpteenth time."

Do you notice how frequently the pronoun "I" was used? You see, our ordinary way of looking at life is from our perspective. Everything revolves around us: our plans, our work, our expectations, our being noticed, our being slighted or taken advantage of, and the list goes on and on. Our typical way of seeing reality is to see ourselves as the center of our own little universe.

Someone with that mindset would have responded differently to the Angel Gabriel's revelation to Mary that she was to be the mother of the long-awaited Messiah. "That's impossible!" "That can't be done that way! "I can't right now, but it would be better for me a year from now." "That's going to complicate my life and undo my plans." "Let me propose another way." I'll think about it and get back to you."

How could the words, "Let it be done to me according to your word," roll off Mary's tongue with such ease? The answer to that question is rooted in how she saw herself, which she revealed with the words, "I am the handmaid of the Lord." A handmaid refers to a female servant who serves her mistress. The handmaid's role was to keep her eyes fixed on her mistress, who, in a social setting, would communicate her desires by a hand signal or a gesture, alerting the handmaid to what her mistress needed.

That is true even in our times. For example, if Queen Elizabeth of England wished to communicate her intentions, she would carry her purse in a particular way. These signals helped her get out of conversations at any time she pleased. If the Queen moved her handbag from its usual spot on her left arm to her right while talking with someone, her attendants or handmaids knew that she wanted to wrap it up. Putting her bag on the floor signifies that she needed to be saved from an uncomfortable encounter ASAP. If she was at dinner and placed it on the table, she wanted to end the event in the next five minutes.[1]

Mary saw herself as the handmaid of the Lord. She had her eyes fixed on the Lord, ready to respond to the divine signals intended for her. She learned them by studying and meditating on the signals God had sent to his people recorded in the Torah, the Prophets, the Wisdom literature, and the Psalms, traveling to the great liturgical feasts in the Temple of Jerusalem, and keeping the Sabbath through her participation in the synagogue. She had already discerned the signals from the Lord indicating she was to be a virgin. How it would fit into the divine plan of salvation was not revealed until the Annunciation.[2]

The vow of virginity summed up her desire to empty herself of her plans, work, and dreams so that God's plans, work, and dreams would be fulfilled through her. She offered her body to God as an outward sign of her interior disposition, signaling the seriousness of her intent to be the handmaid of the Lord. Such a decision was then and is now very dramatic, unusual, and a head-turner.[3]

That helps us to understand why Fr. Colin wanted Marists to think, judge, feel, and act like Mary in all things. The goal of those spiritual exercises is to identify with Mary. The primordial vocation of a Marist is to become a handmaid or an attendant to the Lord. Regardless of our station in life, occupation, or age, we want to reach that point when we empty

[1] www.rd.com/article/queen-elizabeth-purse/

[2] This would mean that St. Joseph was aware and approved of her intentions when he was betrothed to her. Her sudden pregnancy would have been doubly troubling to him.

[3] The great Catholic writer Flannery O'Connor was known for her characters often being unlikeable, eccentric, and even violent but still capable of bearing God's grace. In a culture that has become deaf to God's presence and actions (grace), she observed that sometimes God must shout to be heard. The Old Testament prophets would agree.

ourselves of ourselves, of having to be the center of our universe and fill the void with the words of Mary, "May it be done according to your word."

From this vantage point, married and single persons can find common ground with those who choose to live as virgins, such as consecrated religious (chastity) or priests who practice celibacy. The difference is that the latter serves as a dramatic and visible reminder that ultimate happiness will not be found in this world but in heaven, and all of our energies should be spent with that goal in mind.[4] That means emptying ourselves of anything that would prevent us from saying with Mary, "May it be done according to your word."

That is another way of understanding what it means to be a disciple of Christ in the spirit of the Virgin Mary.

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[4]Granted, being a virgin and a celibate priest will be considered extreme, misunderstood, and often ridiculed. Nothing new there. This is especially true given our society's obsession with sex where almost everything is sexualized.

As an aside, nowhere is that on display than in the world of fashion. High schools struggle with the attire that students wear at school. Students and parents offer stiff resistance when schools try to introduce the virtue of modesty into the conversation. Sadly, this is true even in Catholic schools.

Whenever Mary appears in apparitions, she is fully clothed. However, those to whom she reveals herself comment on how beautiful she is. In a veiled way, she is commenting on society's obsession with portraying women as sexual objects. This puts immense pressure on young girls to look the part. To lay that expectation upon them is unreal, unfair, and unhealthy. The extent women and men buy into that thinking makes both enablers of a narrow and dysfunctional view of beauty that impacts how girls and women determine their self-worth. Instead, the Virgin Mary emphasizes the beauty of being feminine including being full of grace (holy). The Virgin Mary is also critiquing men who insist that women conform to our society's expectations in this regard which are largely their own. A Marist school should follow Mary's lead.

During the time of the Hebrew Scriptures, the pagan religions had a similar obsession that found expression in the practice of temple prostitution. Israel constantly struggled to resist that temptation together with human sacrifice, especially child sacrifice. Both were often a feature of pagan worship.

When an unexpected pregnancy happens, the mother, in particular, has a choice that involves a sacrifice. Either she chooses to give birth, which could include adoption, thereby sacrificing her goals and dreams, at least, for the immediate future, or she terminates the pregnancy, sacrificing the life of the fetus so that her reputation, goals, and dreams remain intact. The father of the child may sacrifice his integrity by leaving the woman to face the consequences alone or choosing to be a partner thereby sharing in the decision and its consequences.

Mary's pregnancy was unexpected, but she trusted God would provide for her. You and I know that the dreams she had for her future were sacrificed for the sake of this child who would one day sacrifice his life for your sake and mine.

Still, to choose to have an abortion or to have the child is often an emotional, psychological, physical, spiritual, and gut-wrenching decision. Many pressures and special circumstances can affect how and what decision is made. Here we need to practice empathy and compassion and recognize that "there but for the grace of God go I." There is a little bit of St. Peter in all of us. Remember, how confident he was that he would never deny Jesus only to do precisely that not once but three times. Anyone who has had an abortion, should be reassured by these words of St. Paul, "For I am convinced that neither death nor life, neither angels nor demons, neither the present nor the future, nor any powers, neither height nor depth, nor anything else in all creation, will be able to separate us from the love of God that is in Christ Jesus our Lord (Romans 8: 38-39)." Please visit the Archdiocese of Atlanta website, *Healing After Abortion*, for additional support.