"Behold, I am the Handmaid of the Lord."

Part #3 – Fr. Bill Rowland, S.M.

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," or "I accomplished all my tasks," or "I had a miserable day," or "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. 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, or "That can't be done that way," or "I can't right now, but it would be better for me a year from now," or "That's going to complicate my life and undo my plans. Let me propose another way," or "I'll think about it and get back to you."

How is it possible that the words, "Let it be done to me according to your word," could 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 referred to a female servant who served 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, which alerted the handmaid to what her mistress needed at that moment.

That is true even in our times. For example, if Queen Elizabeth of England wishes to communicate her intentions, she will carry her purse in a particular way. These signals help her get out of conversations at any time she pleases. "If the Queen moves her handbag from its usual spot on her left arm to her right arm while she's talking with someone, her attendants or handmaids know that she wants to wrap it up. Putting her bag on the floor signifies that she needs to be saved from an uncomfortable encounter ASAP. If she's at dinner and places it on the table, that means she wants 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, 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 remain a virgin though the reason for doing so was not revealed until the Annunciation.

The vow of virginity summed up her desire to empty herself of her plans, her work, and her dreams so that God's plans, God's work, and God's 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.

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

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

When it comes to our students discerning how they might live their lives in light of the Gospel, first, they must identify with Mary and become a handmaid or servant of the Lord, as I described above. It is required to be a disciple of Jesus, which the Church regards Mary as the model par excellence. It is also necessary for being a friend of Jesus, "You are my friends if you do what I command." (John 15:14) Only when a student has made that fundamental decision to live for the Lord as his handmaid or servant, like Mary, can they be able to say, "May it be done to me according to your word." Those words can only be spoken by a disciple and friend of Jesus.