The Marist Way of Fighting the Battles of the Lord Under the Banner of Mary – Part 7

"The very name, The Society of Mary, indicates the banner under which it desires to serve in fighting the battles of the Lord and what its spirit should be."

1872 Constitutions of the Society of Mary, Article 1.1

I know I am dating myself when I refer to one of the Indiana Jones movies, *Raiders of the Lost Ark*, which was about finding the Ark of the Covenant. In the Old Testament, the Ark was an ornate chest containing the remnants of the Ten Commandments, a container of manna that God sent to feed the Israelites when they fled Egypt, and the rod of Aaron.[1] On top of the Ark were two angels. Their wings were configured to form a seat upon which the Lord God would dwell in the midst of his people. The Ark was where the Divine Presence, located in the *Holy of Holies* in the Temple in Jerusalem, resided in Israel.

Before the Temple of Solomon was built, the Ark of the Covenant was carried into battle by the armies of Israel when they went out against their enemies. The Israelites believed it bore God's presence and power. It was lost during the Babylonian invasion, and there is no end to the speculation about where it may be found. To this day, Israel still longs for the return of the Ark of the Covenant.

The early Church saw Mary, the mother of Jesus, as the Ark of the New Covenant. Why? She carried within her womb the presence of God, Jesus, the second person of the Trinity. This new and definitive Ark, Mary, is also associated with battle. In the Book of Revelation, a woman is about to give birth and is confronted by a huge, red dragon with seven heads and ten horns. This woman is understood to be Mary. From the moment she is about to give birth to the Son of God, a terrible enemy confronts her in the form of a dragon. The dragon symbolizes all the forms of worldly power – pride, greed, and coercive power and their evil offshoots that promote violence, oppression, and opposition to God. Those are also the calling cards of the Devil. He is the one power that rules them all.

The Book of Revelation teaches that this dragon is powerless against this woman and her child. We learn that she gives birth to a son destined to rule all the nations with an iron rod. This child was caught up to God in his heavenly throne. That is a colorful way of saying that this baby and his mother are more powerful than the world's most powerful armies and all of their political might. Mary, the Ark of the New Covenant, leads the Church into battle against those powers I described above that serve the dictates of the Evil One.

[1] https://www.oneforisrael.org/bible-based-teaching-from-israel/why-is-it-called-an-ark/.

Note the use of martial imagery in the *Magnificat*. In referencing her son, Mary boldly proclaims, "He has shown the strength of his arm. He has scattered the proud in their conceit. He has cast down the mighty from their thrones and has lifted the lowly. He has filled the hungry with good things while the rich he has sent away empty." Mary is the Ark of the New Covenant who carries in her womb the Messiah who is destined to usurp the crown from Satan and establish the Reign of God and himself as the Lord of all the nations. His reign will be established in power and glory and will last forever.

She is the Ark of the New Covenant that the Church carries into battle against the powers of darkness. The *Magnificat* declares that with the coming of Jesus, the enemy territory has been breached, and not even the gates of hell will prevail against it. Victory is guaranteed, though it will not come easily nor without suffering casualties. It will take time for the Reign of God to be fully established, but it will be fully established nonetheless.

Should you doubt the birth of Jesus signaled that a new and decisive phase had begun in the spiritual warfare with the Devil, let's look at the description of the angels who appeared to the shepherds that night. Luke tells us, "And suddenly there was with the angel [that appeared to the shepherds in the fields] a multitude of the heavenly host praising God and saying, 'Glory to God in the highest, and on earth peace among those with whom he is pleased!'" (Luke 2:13-14 ESV) The Greek word *stratia*, translated as host, has military overtones. I like to imagine the shepherds looking to the heavens and as far as their eyes could see, a powerful angelic army robed in battle array stood before them.[2]

For now, they announce peace to men of goodwill because the coming of Jesus begins a period of amnesty or mercy. That is the message of Jesus that begins his public ministry. "This is the time of fulfillment. The kingdom of God is at hand. Repent, and believe in the gospel" (Mark 1:14). Jesus does not come in power and majesty but as an infant who will one day suffer and die on the cross for our sins and rise again. He continues to preach the same message of amnesty and mercy through his Mystical Body, the Church.

The day will come when the Risen Christ will come in glory with the same heavenly host of angels that had heralded a time of peace and amnesty at his birth. Then, they will defeat those who rebelled by scorning the Lord's patience and snubbing his mercy. Those who misinterpreted the Lord's offer of mercy and amnesty as signs of God's indifference, weakness, or even nonexistence will regret rejecting the Good News when they heard it.

[2] https://www.joshuahawkins.com/blog/2012/12/the-heavenly-armies-at-jesus-birth/.

Mary consistently presents herself as a spiritual warrior in the Church-approved apparitions at Lourdes, Guadalupe, and Fatima. When Mary appeared at Fatima, she announced a Great War would preoccupy the people of the 20th century: the war against Communism. She also called upon the Church to follow her lead, using the weapons of prayer (the Mass and the rosary) and penance.

That sounds preposterous, doesn't it: fighting the great powers of death and violence with prayer and penance! To those who wield such worldly powers, it is laughable. I suspect neither Lenin nor Stalin is laughing because it is precisely prayer and penance that defeated Communism without a shot being fired.

We Marists acknowledge that our religious congregation engages in this spiritual battle. The 1872 Constitutions tell us that the very name, The Society of Mary, indicates "…the banner under which it desires to serve in fighting the battles of the Lord and what its spirit should be." We do not fight with the weapons of this world but with spiritual weapons (Ephesians 6:10-11, 14-17). When confronting the dark powers at work in the world, the attitude of Marists should not be one of defensiveness, victimization, defeat, or fear. That is not the spirit of Mary.

What, then, should be our response to these dark forces, especially when evil appears to have its way? Fr. Ronald Rolheiser, OMI, offers a very astute insight into this question from his reflections on Mary standing at the foot of the cross. In his article, *"Mary Under the Cross,"* he comments that in the Gospels, Mary is the next important person to watch after Jesus.[3] She is the model of discipleship because she gets it right. He says, "She gets it right under the cross."

Fr. Rolheiser reflects on the significance of her standing as opposed to lying prostrate. "Prostration, in this situation, is weakness, collapse, hysteria, resignation. In the Gospels, 'standing' is the opposite, a position of strength."[4]

While standing at the foot of the cross, Mary could not stop what was happening. "But she could stop some of the hatred, bitterness, jealousy, heartlessness, and anger that caused it. While it is important to throw ourselves in the face of injustice and to try to prevent it, the reality is that there will be times when darkness will have its hour, and all we can do is stand under the cross. Mary helped stop the bitterness by refusing to give it back in kind, transforming it rather than transmitting it, swallowing hard, and (literally) eating bitterness rather than giving it back…"[5]

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[3] *www.the-tidings.com/2006/0407/rolheiser*.

[4] Ibid.
[5] Ibid.

There is a hidden strength in her response that calls to mind the qualities or the spirit of Mary that I alluded to earlier. She radiates strength, determination, and utter confidence that this evil will be reversed and that Satan's days are numbered. Here, it would be appropriate to revisit the question posed by Pope Francis with which I began this series of reflections, "It is enough to open a newspaper, and we see that around us there is the presence of evil. The Devil is at work. But I would like to say in a loud voice, 'God is stronger.' Do you believe this?" Mary's response to her son's death on Calvary is how she answered that question.

In my final reflection, we will look at the practical steps to shore up our defenses against "the snares of the Devil." (2 Timothy 2:26)