

Feasts  
Funerals  
Weddings

**FOLLOWING LOVE  
INTO MYSTERY**

The Spiritual Wisdom  
of the Gospels for  
Christian Preachers  
and Teachers



JOHN SHEA

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of the Gospels for  
Christian Preachers  
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*Feasts, Funerals, and Weddings*

*Following Love into Mystery*

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*For Anne*

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# The Immaculate Conception of the Blessed Virgin Mary

Luke 1:26-38



## Scratching in the Earth

*A Spiritual Commentary*

In the sixth month the angel Gabriel was sent by God to a town in Galilee called Nazareth, to a virgin engaged to a man whose name was Joseph, of the house of David. The virgin's name was Mary.

And he came to her and said, "Greetings, favored one! The Lord is with you." But she was much perplexed by his words and pondered what sort of greeting this might be.

The angel said to her, "Do not be afraid, Mary, for you have found favor with God. And now, you will conceive in your womb and bear a son, and you will name him Jesus. He will be great, and will be called the Son of the Most High, and the Lord God will give to him the throne of his ancestor David. He will reign over the house of Jacob forever, and of his kingdom there will be no end."

Mary said to the angel, "How can this be, since I am a virgin?" The angel said to her, "The Holy Spirit will come upon you, and the power of the Most High will overshadow you; therefore the child to be born will be holy; he will be called Son of God. And now, your relative Elizabeth in her old age has also conceived a son; and this is the sixth month for her who was said to be barren. For nothing will be impossible with God."

Then Mary said, "Here am I, the servant of the Lord; let it be with me according to your word." Then the angel departed from her.

In Luke's story Gabriel has made a previous appearance. Six months earlier he visited Zechariah as he performed the duties of the high priest in the Holy of Holies in the temple. Priest and temple is an appropriate



setting for an angelic visitation. Now, however, it is a small-town setting and the visit is to a virgin of transitional social standing, betrothed but not yet living with her husband. This is an unexpected setting for angels. On the surface it seems the angel has visited both ends of the social spectrum. Gabriel is present in the temple and in the village, to the priest and to the virgin. (See Year B, "Fourth Sunday of Advent.")

However, the priest and the virgin have something in common. They are both figures of longing. Zechariah's yearning is blatant. He and his wife Elizabeth, though aged, have been praying for a child. They have disposed themselves and are waiting for divine graciousness. Their waiting is over. Gabriel's opening line to Zechariah is, "Fear not! Your prayers have been heard." Mary is also a figure of longing, but her longing is more subtle. It is not openly stated; it is symbolized by her virginity. On the physical level, virginity means lack of sexual intercourse. On the social level, the virginity of a woman in ancient cultures signified nonattachment. She did not belong to anyone. On the spiritual level, virginity was two-sided. It meant both detachment from the world and commitment to God. This spiritual virginity was not always a separate state. It was a transcendent commitment that could be differentiated but was not completely divorced from sexual and social commitments. The longing at the center of Mary's virginity is both spiritual and social. She is committed to both God and Joseph.

In this episode the key to Joseph's significance is that he is of the house of David. God swore to David that he would build him a house. "Moreover, I declare to you that I, the LORD, will build you a house . . . I will raise up your offspring after you who will be one of your own sons, and I will establish his kingdom. . . . I will be a father to him, and he shall be a son to me . . ." (1 Chr 17:10-13, NAB). This son of David, to whom God will be a father, will in turn build God a house. "He it is who shall build me a house, and I will establish his throne forever." This is the ancient prophesy that backs up Gabriel's prediction: "[The] Lord God will give to him the throne of his ancestor David. He will reign over the house of Jacob forever, and of his kingdom there will be no end." Mary is not only committed to God; she is also dedicated to what God is building in the world.

Therefore, Mary's longing for God should not be construed along romantic lines that were developed in later Christian mysticism. This is not a love affair with God vaguely modeled after a man and woman's passionate yearning for each other. Mary is hungry and thirsty for righteousness. Later, she will sing of God's influx into her soul that causes

her to become a magnification of Spirit. But immediately she will connect this personal communion with social change.

His mercy is for those who fear him  
from generation to generation.  
He has shown strength with his arm;  
he has scattered the proud in the thoughts of their hearts.  
He has brought down the powerful from their thrones,  
and lifted up the lowly;  
he has filled the hungry with good things,  
and sent the rich away empty. (Luke 1:50-53)

Mary's longing for God results in a social transformation, a restructuring of society. The angel Gabriel is instructing her in how to translate this kingdom consciousness into reality.

Paradoxically, the virginity that at one stage symbolizes her longing is, at another stage, the path to its fulfillment. Spiritual traditions always acknowledge that it is God who builds the house. The Ultimate Author is the One who must be credited. Human hands are certainly responsible, but they must be energized and guided by Spirit. Therefore, it is not a matter of Mary having a male sexual partner, as if building God's house was a purely physical endeavor. Her question to Gabriel about "how can this be" is misplaced. It is a matter of learning how to mediate Spirit into flesh, of allowing the spiritual order to have effects in the biosocial order. How it will happen is "The Holy Spirit will come upon you, and the power of the Most High will overshadow you." Predictably, Gabriel is putting the emphasis on the architect because what is envisioned is well beyond the solo work of human hands. In fact, it is impossible to try to do it without doing it with God.

But what does Mary need to do in order to facilitate this happening? How does she comply with the Spirit?

Initially, she must be open and ready to receive. "Here I am, the servant of the Lord." This is a further quality of spiritual virginity. Spiritual virginity is an emptiness that Caryll Houselander likens to the "hollow in a reed, the narrow riftless emptiness that can have only one destiny: to receive the piper's breath and to utter the song that is in his heart . . . an emptiness like the hollow in the cup, shaped to receive water and wine" (*The Reed of God*. New York: Sheed & Ward, 1944). But in order for the piper to breathe his song into her she must consent. In fact, she must go beyond consent, beyond mere acquiescence. She must desire it with all her heart, allowing her longing to unify her mind,

will, and behavior—"let it be with me according to your word." With this singleness of heart, she becomes the virgin mother, the symbol of uniting both spiritual and social commitments. She is detached from the world as it is, but she is attached to God and the divine energy to build another world. This virginal commitment is the longing to make Spirit into flesh. She will bring forth a Son who will build God's house in the world.

### *Teaching*

In 1858 Bernadette Soubirous saw eighteen apparitions of a "small young lady." Although she never claimed the lady was the Blessed Virgin Mary, she was pushed by her parish priest to inquire after the lady's name. At first the lady demurred, bowing and smiling, but saying nothing. Finally, she said, "I am the Immaculate Conception." Commentators say that it is very probable Bernadette had never heard the name before. If this is so, it adds credibility to the vision.

During one of the lady's visitations, she pointed to a place on the ground and told Bernadette to drink from the spring that flowed there and eat from the plants that grew there. But Bernadette could not see any spring or plants, only muddy ground. She assumed the lady meant the spring was underground. So she scratched in the earth until some muddy drops appeared. She attempted to drink them, but it was not possible. She continued to scratch and tried to drink three times without success. Finally, on the fourth try, the water was more abundant and clearer. She drank it and ate from the plants.

However, when she turned toward the curious crowd that had assembled, her face was smeared with mud. No one saw any streams of water or plants. The crowd immediately denounced her as a fraud. However, in the next few days, clear water began to flow from the earth, exactly in the place where Bernadette was scratching. People began to drink the water and bathe in it. Many reported cures and healings. Although chemists studied the water and found it normal, the cures and healing continued. The rest, as they say, is history, the history of Lourdes.

The historical accuracy and physical facts of this story are open to investigation. But the literary form of the story suggests hidden spiritual meanings. In the vision the lady styles herself as the Immaculate Conception. This translates as someone who is in communion with God and does not suffer the effects of alienation caused by sin. Official

Catholic teaching and subsequent theology has spelled out the reasons for this teaching and its implications. But when the Immaculate Conception gives instructions to Bernadette, the center of attention shifts from the Lady to the one searching in the earth for water and plants. The significant symbolic features are: (1) the Immaculate Conception asks Bernadette to drink from the water and eat the plants that are underground, (2) Bernadette has to scratch four times in the earth to make the water appear, and (3) no one but Bernadette sees the water and plants. To the eyes of the bystanders, it is all mud.

Spiritual traditions think there is a spiritual center in the human person. This spiritual center is underground, an interior depth, lying deeper than the physical and mental dimensions. It is not easily found, and we must search in and through the muddier dimensions for the water to flow. We must persevere in the scratching, even going beyond the traditional symbolic number of three. It is on the fourth scratching that what blocks the Spirit/water will be moved away and the Spirit/water will release, flow outward, bubble up. As Jesus said to the Samaritan woman, "the water that I will give will become . . . a spring of water gushing up to eternal life" (John 4:14). But this flow is not a sudden geyser; it is gradual and increases as people have the courage to participate in it. At first, only those privileged by revelation will attempt to drink. But soon others will drink and bathe, and the healing powers of the Spirit will become manifest.

I think there is in every person an underground longing. There is a story about it from the Hassidic tradition. With his disciples gathered around, a Rabbi begins his teaching about the reality of God. When he finishes, he asks, "Do you understand?"

"No," they answer.

Then he introduces them into the mystery of God's presence in the universe, ending this teaching with, "Do you understand?"

"No," they answer.

In desperation, the Rabbi spins tales of wonder from past times. When he finishes, he is exhausted from the exhilaration of Spirit. He hesitantly asks his question. The disciples hang their heads. The answer is no.

The Rabbi becomes quiet. He begins to sing, a haunting melody of yearning, pining, longing for God. The disciples' heads begin to rise. Their speech merges together, each voice attuned to the longing of the song.

The Rabbi did not have to ask. They understood.

8 *Following Love into Mystery*

We may not understand the higher reaches of spiritual thought, but we all sway to the Rabbi's song. Each of us shares the spiritual-social longing of Mary. However, it may be underground. On the surface, we are immersed in the world as it is; and we work overtime to simply survive and/or to survive in style. But the deeper yearning is there and it never goes away. It is not merely a childish desire for what is missing, a form of utopian delusion. We long for a better world that we already know in embryonic form. It does not come to us from beyond ourselves while we wait expectantly. It comes out of us, out of the earth we are part of—if only we would dig deep enough and drink from the water that freely flows.