

# Pray Very Much

By Carol Monaco

I want to thank Sheila Parker, Jackie Wilson, the Sodality Union Leadership team, and the Nativity Sodality Executive Board for having me here today. It is an honor and pleasure to be given this opportunity to meet all of you, representing the Sodalities of the Archdiocese.

God knows that living our faith is not easy. That's why He gives us Mary Our Blessed Mother to help us, to teach us, to guide us, and to lead us on our Journey. St. Louis de Montfort wrote, "He who finds Mary finds life—that is Jesus Christ who is the way, the truth and the life."<sup>1</sup>

Each one of us is on a journey and the path we take is based on our individual choices made by our own free will. What we do in this world, how we treat ourselves, how we treat one another, how we respond to adversity, and what role we allow God the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit to play in our lives will determine whether we go to Heaven or at least be pointed in the right direction.

I have to admit that for the first half of my life, I did not get very far on my journey. I was indifferent to God and my Catholic faith. The Holy Trinity and the Blessed Mother did not play a major role in my life. Everything I had learned about Catholicism was in the negative – we're sinners, we're guilty, we have to suffer – I thought "What a downer! Where's the good stuff, where's the joy?" And yet all the while I knew something was not quite right in my life.

Then a change began to occur after I moved to DC and started attending the Our Lady of Perpetual Help Mass and Novena at the National Shrine of the Immaculate Conception. There I met my spiritual director and after he learned of my journalism background, he asked me to write a newsletter about the Blessed Mother. I said OK. I had no idea of what I was getting into. At that point in my life, my only experience with Marian devotion was trying to pray the Rosary without getting distracted, attending the monthly Mass and Novena at the National Shrine, and watching the movies – "The Miracle of Our Lady of Fatima" and "The Song of Bernadette" whenever they aired on Turner Classic Movies.

I had no idea that writing *Journey to Our Lady* for the past 14 years would transform my life – in quiet, gentle, little ways and that transformation continues – and the journey continues – and that journey has brought us together today.

It's no coincidence that we are meeting here at the beginning of Lent with the official start of spring around the corner and the 100<sup>th</sup> anniversary of Fatima's first Marian apparition just two months away. May 13 to be exact. What do we do during this time of year? We prepare. We prepare our gardens to plant seeds for flowers to grow and beautify our homes, we spring clean our houses to clear out the dust and clutter to feel fresh and renewed, and we open our windows to enjoy the first breath of spring.

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<sup>1</sup> St. Louis Marie de Montfort, *True Devotion to the Blessed Virgin*; (Bay Shore, Montfort Publications 2002); paragraph #50e

That's what God want us to do with our lives. God wants us to prepare ourselves – to clean out the clutter that causes distractions and sin. To open our hearts and souls for our Lord to plant the seeds of faith, hope, and love in us so that Jesus can grow and rise within us and live through us each and every day for the sake of our salvation and the salvation of the world.

Mary is a central figure in God's plan of salvation, according Father Andrew Apostoli who wrote *Fatima for Today*.<sup>2</sup> Father Apostoli said, "Mary plays a major role, second only to her Son Jesus in the work of redeeming the world."<sup>3</sup> Mary is a wonderful role model for us. Our Lady can help us with every aspect of our lives so that we can live life the way God wants us to live it.

By all accounts, Mary was meek and modest and humble, but that does not mean she was a pushover. Mary was a strong woman and all human! She had to be strong to keep her heart open wide—especially after Mary saw her Son die on the cross. It is so easy to shut down when life gets tough, but Mary never did. Her strength came from her love, faith, and trust in God. Our Lady shares that strength with us just as Our Lady shared it with the children of Fatima. Mary was their refuge. Mary is our refuge.

When we embrace Mary, we embrace all that Our Lady holds dear – God the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit. And when we say yes to God's call, as Mary did and as the children of Fatima did, we say yes to a whole way of life. We allow the Holy Spirit to come upon us and the power of the Most High to overshadow us so that Christ can live in us and through us each and every day and our lives will be transformed.

Mary shows us the way. St Louis de Montfort wrote: "Mary shows her faithful the path to eternal life and helps them avoid the dangerous pitfalls. She leads them by the hand along the path of holiness, steadies them when they are liable to stumble and helps them rise when they have fallen."<sup>4</sup> Why? Because Mary is our Mother. When we follow Mary, we can't go wrong.

That's why Our Lady's message to the children of Fatima is just as relevant today as it was 100 years ago – that message is to Pray Very Much, especially the Rosary. So let us follow Mary, with Lucia, Francisco, and Jacinta as our companions, and explore the Rosary. Let us see what we can find to help us live our faith in our daily lives and deepen our relationship with Our Blessed Mother which deepens our relationship with God the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit.

In the joyful mysteries, one of the first messages we receive is Do Not Be Afraid. That's what the Archangel said to Mary. We are given the same message when the Angel first appeared to the children of Fatima in the spring of 1916 and when Mary first appeared to them on May 13, 1917. It is the same message that Karol Wojtyla delivered when he became Pope John Paul II.

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<sup>2</sup> Father Andrew Apostoli, *Fatima for Today; The Urgent Marian Message of Hope*; Ignatius Press, San Francisco, pg. 2

<sup>3</sup> Father Andrew Apostoli, *Fatima for Today; The Urgent Marian Message of Hope*; Ignatius Press, San Francisco, pg. 2

<sup>4</sup> St. Louis Marie de Montfort, *True Devotion to the Blessed Virgin*; (Bay Shore, Montfort Publications 2002); paragraph 209

We should not be afraid to open our hearts, to say yes to God’s call, to obey His will, to live our faith, and be active participants in our Lord’s plan for peace and salvation for us and for our world. AND we should not be afraid to love Mary and to share Mary. The fact that Our Lady was born without the blemish of original sin should not intimidate us nor should we fear that devotion to Mary could somehow overshadow the adoration owed to the Holy Trinity. St. Louis de Montfort said: “Mary must be better known than ever before for the deeper understanding and greater glory of the Blessed Trinity.”<sup>5</sup> Regardless of any resistance we may encounter, our purpose is to share God’s love and mercy in this world in whatever way He wants to use us. As Mary said, “May it be done to me according to your Word,” [Luke 1:38] because with God, all things are possible.

So we have work to do in God’s plan – just as Mary had work to do. Our Lady did not sit back and keep the good news to herself. Mary went the extra mile. Mary went to her cousin Elizabeth to share the good news, to share God’s love. “My soul proclaims the greatness of the Lord,” said Mary [Luke 1:46]. In essence, Jesus shone through Mary at the visitation and through Mary, the Lord’s light shone upon Lucia, Francisco, and Jacinta to help them see God’s loving graces that would console and protect them as they obeyed God’s will.

If we want Our Lord’s light to shine upon us and through us, we have to be open to the light AND we have to treat ourselves with respect. There was a saying: My body is my temple. Today it seems like society wants us to treat our bodies like amusement parks. If we don’t respect our bodies with a sense of modesty, if we do not respect ourselves, how can we respect life and all that it has to offer? Life is God’s gift to us and yet a lot of people abuse their bodies and throw away their lives, and in many cases, throw away life before it has a chance to be born.

It was through Mary’s faith, hope, and love that Christ was born into our world for our salvation and it was through Mary that the thoughts of many hearts would be revealed as Simeon said when Mary and Joseph presented Jesus at the temple. And it was at Fatima that Mary revealed that God wanted to establish a world devotion to her Immaculate Heart—which is our refuge and the way that will lead us to God.

Mary is our refuge particularly in times of stress and suffering. Mary understands our suffering because she experienced it. Mary knows the sorrow of losing Jesus—first as a young boy when Mary and Joseph could not find Jesus for three days until they discovered Him in the temple, and then at the foot of her Son’s cross.

What Mary did not understand, she pondered in her heart. Despite the pain, suffering, and anxiety that Mary experienced in her lifetime on earth, Mary never closed her heart. Mary shows us how to keep our heart open even in times of great struggle—by loving God as He should be loved—without hesitation and with full faith and trust in His word, His way and His mercy. In other words, by putting our lives completely in God’s hands. That’s exactly what the children of Fatima did with their lives and their lives were changed forever. There have been so many times when I’ve put my life in God’s hands—only to snatch it back because I was afraid of what He

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<sup>5</sup> St. Louis Marie de Montfort, *True Devotion to the Blessed Virgin*; (Bay Shore, Montfort Publications 2002) paragraph #50e

was going to do with it. So putting ourselves in God's hands requires strength, perseverance, and obedience. We learn more about those traits in the Luminous and Sorrowful mysteries.

When Jesus was baptized, the heavens opened up and the Spirit came upon Him and a voice from Heaven said "This is my beloved Son in whom I am well-pleased." [Matthew 3:17] God wants that for all of us—to be open to the Holy Spirit and to be Christ-like in our daily living. To do so, we need to be obedient to God's will. When Mary asked Jesus for help at the Wedding Feast of Cana, she said to the servants "Do whatever He tells you" [John 2:5]. In the Proclamation of the Kingdom of God, Christ tells us to repent and believe in the gospel [Mark 1:15]. That message is reinforced in the Transfiguration when the voice from Heaven said: "This is my beloved Son in whom I am well-pleased. Listen to him" [Mark 9:7].

That is why it is so important for us to clear away the distractions and noise and busyness in our lives. There is a saying: If the devil does not make us bad, it makes us busy. We need to give ourselves space and time; we need to have that quiet room in our lives so we can listen to our Lord and follow His directions.

The children of Fatima were obedient. They listened. Despite the pressures against them, Lucia, Francisco, and Jacinta stood firm and never turned their backs on Mary. And when Mary showed the children visions of Hell, as horrified as they were—that vision strengthened their resolve to do whatever they could to save as many souls as possible from Hell.

We can do the same. Like the children of Fatima, we can be obedient and offer up all that we do through prayers and sacrifice to save souls. And in doing so, our lives will be transformed—not overnight, but quietly, gently, and most meaningfully. We will live more for God and less for ourselves. We'll make more room for God's love by going to confession and by receiving the Holy Eucharist. By giving Himself – His body, blood, soul, and divinity--to us, Christ gives us everything to strengthen our will and reinforce our resolve to sin no more and to love one another as God loves us. And like Mary, when we say yes to God's call and remain obedient to His will, we open the door to all that is good and true. With modesty and humility as our companions, good works replace sinful acts, selflessness overcomes selfishness and hope is given to the hopeless—bringing our world closer to Heaven. That's the joy!

To succeed, we need God's strength because even when we are centered totally in God's love, we are going to suffer trials and tribulations because that is part of life. The key to entering the Kingdom of Heaven is in how we respond to life's challenges.

No one wants to suffer. Christ did not want to suffer. He prayed in agony in the Garden of Olives—"Take this cup away from me, but not what I will but what you will" [Mark 14:36]. Christ prayed for strength. Mary prayed for strength. The children of Fatima prayed for strength. We too must pray for strength especially when our suffering tests our faith.

The ridicule, the scorn, the scourging, the crowning of thorns, the great pain and suffering, Christ endured it all for our redemption, AND He responded with faith, hope and love. Yes, Christ stumbled and needed help carrying his cross and he felt abandoned when He said "My God, my God why have you forsaken me?" [Matthew 27:46] And yet from His Cross, He

gave us mercy when he said: “Father, forgive them, for they know not what they do” [Luke 23:34]. He gave us hope when He said to the repentant criminal: “today you will be with me in paradise” [Luke 23:43]. He gave us love when He gave us Mary to be our Mother, and He gave us faith when He said: “Father, into thy hands I commend my spirit.” [Luke 23: 46]

When Mary first appeared to the children of Fatima, she asked if they would be willing to offer themselves to God and bear all the suffering He wills to send them as an act of reparation for sins by which He is offended and of supplications for the conversion of sinners.<sup>6</sup> The children said yes. And Our Lady responded: “You are going to have much to suffer, but the grace of God will be your comfort.”<sup>7</sup>

Lucia said later that they did not know what they were getting into, but they had no regrets. And on top of all the pressure, ridicule, the scorn, the threats, and even being thrown in jail, the children continued to make their own sacrifices like giving their lunches to the poor, eating bitter acorns, and wearing rope around their waists. They endured it all with faith, hope, and love because they wanted to everyone to go to Heaven.

Do you think most children today or even adults have the fortitude to go through that? To actually say yes to suffering and then add on personal sacrifices? Honestly, I don’t know if I could do that. When life gets tough, I hunker down. I eat comfort food. I drink wine. I have chocolate. I do not look to add to my discomfort. I just don’t think to go the extra mile and use suffering as an act of reparation for sins. I’m too busy suffering.

Pope John Paul II once said that suffering is the instrument by which love is released in the act of caring and healing. But today, there is such an aversion to suffering to the point where we have an opioid and heroine epidemic and physician-assisted suicide in six states.

The children of Fatima were able to say yes because they were already living their faith and praying the Rosary even before the Angel first visited them. Are children today living their faith? Are families teaching and encouraging the Rosary? There are a lot of excuses for not praying the Rosary and I’ve used them all.

The bottom line is no matter what life throws at us—ridicule, abuse, physical pain, emotional distress—we are asked to respond with faith, hope, and love, not just for our own peace and salvation, but for the peace and salvation of everyone especially those in most need of God’s mercy. We learn from Jesus, Mary, Lucia, Francisco, and Jacinta that the journey to Heaven is not easy. It is often painful with many obstacles, but the journey is worth it.

In the Glorious mysteries, Christ rises from the dead and ascends into Heaven, conquering sin and blazing a path to God’s Heavenly Kingdom. With every step we take, with every sacrifice we make with faith, love, and hope in our hearts, we bring ourselves and our world closer to Heaven.

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<sup>6</sup> Father Andrew Apostoli, *Fatima for Today; The Urgent Marian Message of Hope*; Ignatius Press, San Francisco, pg. 46

<sup>7</sup> Father Andrew Apostoli, *Fatima for Today; The Urgent Marian Message of Hope*; Ignatius Press, San Francisco, pg. 47

By the power of the Holy Spirit, we can rise to a higher level of holiness—to live more for God and less for ourselves. Mary is our role model. Born without original sin and already dedicated to God, our Heavenly Father raised Mary to greater holiness when she said yes to God's call to be mother of our Savior. Our Lady was raised even higher when she became mother to us all at the foot of her Son's cross and when she received the Holy Spirit again at Pentecost. Assumed into Heaven body and soul, Our Mother is the Queen of the Most Holy.

Like the children of Fatima, Mary wants each of us to live a holy life to make our world a better place and die a holy death so we may join Our Blessed Mother in Heaven with God the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit for all eternity. Our Lady and the Rosary show us how.

With the beauty of spring, God reminds us that now is the time for renewal---to be born again. God gives us every opportunity to start clean and fresh through the sacrament of penance and He nourishes us and strengthens us with the Holy Eucharist.

Our mission – if we choose to accept it – is to pray and do good works for the rest of our lives. Those prayers and good works have a way of spreading. What started with three little kids and a cova grew to 70,000 witnessing the miracle of the sun on October 13, 1917 and now millions go to Fatima to pay homage and to pray.

As for my own personal journey, there have been times when I thought I had nothing left to write, nothing left to give. I'd pray the Rosary and the inspirations, reflections, prayers, and poetry always come.

So fear not. Whatever anxieties or dark clouds we may face on our journey, Mary with her maternal love, along with her army of angels and saints will guide us, support us, and protect us especially as we take on those extra miles. And in the end, Our Lady's Immaculate Heart will triumph.

I'd like to close with a poem.

You build your nest with twigs and straw  
and  
make your home up high.  
You hope you'll do your very best,  
despite a dark cloud  
that's always nigh.  
Who knows what  
that cloud will bring;  
despite the worry  
you choose to sing.  
Yes, you sing!  
You herald the first breath of Spring!  
And  
though that cloud is always near

in your heart you try not to fear.  
Remember, Our Lord God is always here.  
True, that cloud may hide God's face,  
but you are not alone on this earthly place.  
The good Lord has sent many to fill His space.  
So take wing and soar the sky  
You need not worry as the cloud rolls by.  
You will make your way  
on this sun-kissed day.  
So take wing  
with the sparrow,  
the blue bird  
and the starling;  
Take wing  
and  
fly Sweet Robin fly!

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