

The Faces of Mary in Sacred Scripture

1. *The Virgin – The Burning Bush (Exodus 3:3-8)*

From ancient times, the Church has sought images and symbols among the pages of sacred Scripture which would help believers draw close to the great mystery of the fecund virginity of Mary - of a woman who could be virgin and mother at the same time. Indeed, never had this been heard spoken of on the face of the earth! How can one imagine such a miracle? How can one describe it? One of the favorite images of the Fathers of the Church in presenting this reality is that of the burning bush in which the Lord revealed himself to Moses on Mt. Horeb.

Severus (VI century), the Patriarch of Antioch, states in a homily: "When I turn my gaze upon the Virgin Mother of God, and I try to sketch out some simple thoughts about her, right from the start I seem to hear a voice which comes from God and which cries aloud in my ear: *'Do not draw near! Remove the sandals from your feet because the place where you are standing is holy ground!'* To draw near to Mary is like drawing near to a holy land and to reach Heaven." Certainly, as St. Ambrose would say: "Mary is not the god of the temple but is the Temple of God." Therefore, we ought to draw near to her as Moses did: with unshod feet because she carries in her womb the God who reveals Himself and who does so in the most transparent and closest way by taking on the flesh of man.

A Marian hymn from the VII century addresses Mary thus: "You are the bush seen by Moses in the midst of the flames but which was not consumed for that bush is the Lord's Son. He came to live in your womb and the fire of His Divinity did not consume your flesh. Pray for us, O Holy Lady!" The perfect virginity of Mary which, in fact, does not consist at all in her having renounced love but in her availability to love and to allow herself to be loved without measure, permits God to take His dwelling in her in person. Indeed, the Son came to live in her womb and all of her person, her body, her intelligence, and her will are enveloped and thoroughly suffused with the fire of the Holy Spirit. Thus, Mary stands before our eyes as the burning bush stands before Moses' eyes: upon her descends the theophanic* fire and in her God (YHWH) makes Himself present to us and able to be experienced by us.

In thousands of pages about Mary, the burning bush is used as a sign of the virginity and of the Divine motherhood of Mary. Even the arts inherited this symbolism. Oftentimes, God the Father is pictured atop the flaming bush on Mt. Horeb, but in the center panel of Nicholas Froment's (1475) *Triptych of the Burning Bush* adorning the Cathedral of Aix-en-Provence, Mary and the Baby appear there atop the foliage of a little tree enveloped by flames. Standing before this marvelous spectacle, we are invited to contemplate, to pray, and to imitate.

Praying with the Word (Exodus 3:3-8):

1. I become fully aware of God's presence. I imagine myself in the midst of the scene, next to Moses before the bush, and I express to the Father my desire to contemplate and to imitate the fecund virginity of Mary, which is prefigured by it.

2. I invoke the help of the Holy Spirit by repeating slowly this (or another) prayer:

"O Holy Spirit, plant the tree of true life, Mary, within me. Water it and cultivate it so that it may grow, flower, and produce abundant fruits of life. O Holy Spirit, Render me profoundly devoted and well-disposed towards Mary, Your divine spouse. Render me trusting of her maternal love and ready to have recourse to her mercy. With her collaboration, form Jesus Christ in me - living, great, strong, mature, and perfect in age. Amen." (St. Louis Grignon de Montfort).

3. I read this excerpt from Exodus 3:3-8 slowly, spending time meditating on these three points:

-wonder and the call (vv. 3-4): What is it that raises up wonder and awe in me as I sit before the fecund Virginity of Mary? Today the Lord calls me also by name to draw near to her.

-removal of the sandals and the Presence (vv. 5-6): What sandals must I remove to be able to draw near to God's presence in Mary? Through her, God reveals also to me how He is the one who is always present in my life and in the life of my dear ones.

-suffering and the promise (vv. 7-8): God becomes Man in the womb of Mary because He feels the suffering of His children and wants to save them. Of what suffering are you speaking to me today, O Lord, through Mary? In which promise do You want to make me take part?

4. I conclude this prayer with a heart-to-heart talk with Mary: I express to her my feelings, doubts, and difficulties in relation to her, and my, mystery of virginity and fecundity.

Our Father...

After having concluded this prayer, I sit still and reflect a little: What has the Holy Spirit said to me through this prayer? Has He encouraged me? Has He invited me to conversion? How do I think I may correspond to the gift received in this prayer?

*(theophanic: referring to a manifestation of God which is tangible to the human senses)