



CHAPTER 1

Mary as Blessed: Our Lady of Knock

I beheld the three likenesses or figures . . . the Blessed Virgin, St. Joseph, and St. John. . . . The eyes of the images could be seen; they were like figures, inasmuch as they did not speak. I was filled with wonder at the sight I saw; I was so affected that I shed tears. I continued looking on for fully an hour, and then I went away to visit Mrs. Campbell, who was in a dying state. When we returned the vision had disappeared.

DOMINICK BYRNE JR.
August 21, 1879¹

There was no message of any kind given, no word was uttered by any of the three celestial visitors. Yet the apparition must have a meaning, an extraordinary, deep, and divine significance.

FR. WILLIAM J. SMITH²



Mary and Joseph rarely speak in scripture; instead, they ponder the events unfolding in front of them (see Luke 2:19, Matthew 1:20). Prayerfully and quietly, Mary bore witness to the Incarnate Love that she brought into the world by her fiat. Her blessedness is most clearly seen in

that simplicity and humility; no words are needed for God's glory to be revealed through her.

So it is with Knock. This singular apparition is sometimes referred to as "Our Lady of Silence," for none of the fifteen individuals who witnessed the appearance of the Blessed Mother heard her say a word. Rather, she stood silently with St. Joseph, St. John the Apostle, and the Lamb of God—standing with a people who had been ravaged over and over by famine, hunger, and disease. Why were they silent? We do not know. Perhaps they understood that their children simply needed them to bear witness to their suffering, and to encourage them to endure without losing hope—just as the Holy Family had persevered in faith and blessedness in raising the One who would bless us all.

Knock, Ireland, 1879

During a pouring rain on August 21, 1879, three human figures—the Virgin Mary, St. Joseph, and St. John the Evangelist (originally thought to be a bishop wearing a miter)—and a lamb on a plain altar with a cross appeared enveloped in a bright light over the gable of the village chapel in a small town in County Mayo, in western Ireland.

Fifteen witnesses, from the very young to the very old, experienced this silent apparition and stood in the rain for up to two hours while reciting the Rosary. When the occurrence began there was good light, but when it became very dark, witnesses could still see the figures very clearly since they appeared illuminated by a bright white light. The apparition did not flicker or move in any way, and unlike most famous Marian apparitions, there were no messages imparted.

The witnesses reported that the ground around the figures remained completely dry during the apparition although the wind was blowing from the south. Afterward, however, the ground at the gable became wet and the whole area dark.

This apparition occurred at a difficult and controversial time in Irish history. The social movements of that era challenged the landlord class. There was a significant conflict that caused the Land War (1879–1882), marked by civil disobedience by impoverished and exploited tenant farmers forcing wealthy landlords to sell their properties to the tenants, a situation that had been present for centuries in Ireland but that came to a head in that period. The government began to buy out the landlords and offer farmers mortgages to buy the land they worked, empowering them to become owners, rather than tenants.

A dilemma befell the Catholic Church, trying to support law and order and property rights while also espousing care and preferential treatment for the poor. The land movement and its violent demonstrations were loudly condemned initially by many priests, one of whom was Fr. Bartholomew Aloysius Cavanaugh, parish priest of Ballyhaunis, where the Knock apparition occurred, and later head of the investigative committee.

In June of 1879, a particularly aggressive demonstration contained by the police was targeted at him, as priests were expected to take the side of the poor. Many of the faithful may have seen the Knock apparition as a higher authority making a statement in support of better treatment of the poor.

The Witnesses

There were fifteen official eyewitnesses (three men, seven women, two teenage boys, and three children) including:

- Mrs. Margaret Byrne, sixty-eight: widow and mother of Mary, Margaret, Dominick Sr. and Patrick
- Mary Byrne, twenty-nine
- Dominick Byrne Sr., thirty-six: cousin of Dominick Jr.; uncle of Patrick Hill
- Margaret Byrne, twenty-one
- Dominick Byrne Jr., nineteen
- Patrick Byrne, sixteen

- Judith Campbell, twenty-two
- John Curry, five
- John Durkan, twenty-four
- Mrs. Hugh Flatley, forty-four
- Patrick Hill, eleven
- Mary McLoughlin, forty-five: housekeeper of the parish priest, Archdeacon Cavanaugh
- Catherine Murray, eight: niece of Margaret Byrne
- Bridget Trench, seventy-five
- Patrick Walsh, sixty-five

Why did God choose these particular individuals to receive this heavenly sign? It is unclear. While they were all living in this very poor village, these visionaries were not the most destitute people of the area. Several were related through the Byrne family, but others were outsiders with no real connection to the group.

The first person to see the vision was Mary McLoughlin, forty-five, the housekeeper of Archdeacon Cavanaugh, who lived three hundred yards away from the village chapel. She had gone to visit the neighbors but did not mention to them that she had detected something odd near the gable of the church. On the way back home, she was accompanied by Mary Byrne, whose job it was to close up the church for the night. The two called over a group of others when they began walking toward the light. Clusters of more and more people began to join. Then Mary McLoughlin ran to alert the priest and to try to get him to join the group, but he paid no attention.

Another group left the apparition still in progress to go fetch Mrs. Campbell, a neighbor woman thought to be dying, and her daughter, Mary. Five-year-old John Curry was the youngest of fifteen people who witnessed the apparition. He sat on Patrick Hill's shoulders as the group recited the Rosary as they watched the "beautiful things" for two hours in the pouring rain.

According to Mary Byrne:

The Virgin stood erect, with eyes raised to heaven; her hands elevated to the shoulders or a little higher, the palms inclined slightly towards the shoulders or bosom; she wore a large cloak of a white color, hanging in full folds and somewhat loosely around her shoulders, and fastened to the neck. She wore a crown on the head, rather a large crown, and it appeared to me somewhat yellower than the dress or robes worn by Our Blessed Lady.³

Mary was described as “deep in prayer,” with her eyes raised to heaven and her hands raised to the shoulders or a little higher, the palms inclined slightly to the shoulders. According to visionary Bridget Trench: “I went in immediately to kiss, as I thought, the feet of the Blessed Virgin; but I felt nothing in the embrace but the wall, and I wondered why I could not feel with my hands the figures which I had so plainly and so distinctly seen.”⁴

The Investigation

Two commissions of inquiry (1879 and 1936) were established. The first investigative commission was set up within six weeks of the apparition on October 8, 1879, by Most Rev. Dr. John MacHale, archbishop of Tuam. It was comprised of Irish scholar and historian Canon Ulick Bourke as well as Canon James Waldron and Archdeacon Cavanaugh.

The fifteen witnesses were examined as well as a man who did not see the apparition close up but testified to seeing the illumination of the church from half a mile away at his farm. Depositions of witnesses were taken in the ensuing months, sometimes with all the panel members there and others to a partial panel. The commission looked at both the facts related to the apparition events and the miraculous cures that people were claiming. Among the considerations were whether the apparition emanated from natural causes and whether there

was any proof positive of fraud. Neither a natural cause nor evidence of fraud were established.

The evidence recorded by the commission satisfied all the members and was deemed "trustworthy and satisfactory."⁵ The details of this apparition were not publicized for several months in the local papers, but as soon as the commission's report was published, pilgrims began to flock to the site from all parts of the country and overseas, much to the dismay of the local priests, who actively discouraged attention given to the apparition events. Many sick were transported there and hundreds of cures were reported in the public press of that time, including the healing of two blind men shortly after the news of the apparition went public.

Beginning in 1880, pilgrims from all over Ireland were drawn to the Knock apparition site. In the span of a little more than a decade, however, the events had been largely forgotten or ignored except by the local community. In the 1930s, some people in Knock began to revive the devotion, perhaps partly due to the international attention given to Marian apparition sites at Lourdes and Fatima. These efforts were spearheaded by a married couple, William and Judy Coyne, who collected evidence from local people and encouraged the devotion with the help of a sympathetic bishop.

In 1936, Dr. Thomas Patrick Gilmartin, archbishop of Tuam, instituted a new investigative commission that again produced a positive verdict. All three surviving witnesses confirmed their original statements given in 1879. One of the witnesses was Mary O'Connell (née Byrne). She confirmed her testimony on her deathbed under oath, stating, "I am clear about everything I have said and I make this statement knowing I am about to go before my God." She died six weeks later.⁶

The verdict of the commission declared again that the "testimony of each of the fifteen official witnesses to the apparition was trustworthy and satisfactory." As a result of this revival of the devotion in the 1930s and the second commission inspired

by that movement and interest, the current shrine and widespread Irish devotion to Our Lady of Knock exists. Now the only approved Marian apparition site in Ireland has become a destination for national and international pilgrimages.

Recognition from Rome

In addition to the positive verdict of two investigative commissions, the Vatican has also recognized the apparition at Knock.

On December 18, 1954, Our Lady of Knock was crowned with the same rites used by Pope Pius XII just a month earlier in Rome in the crowning of the miraculous, sixth-century Byzantine Marian icon *Salus Populi Romani*. Amid crowds of more than 450,000 people, Pope John Paul II visited the Knock shrine for the one hundredth anniversary of the apparition on September 30, 1979, and presented a Golden Rose, a seldom-bestowed token of papal honor and recognition, to the shrine.⁷



The feast of Our Lady of Knock is celebrated in Ireland and around the world on August 21.



Mary as “Blessed” in Scripture and throughout Church History

by Dr. Robert Fastiggi

In the 1879 apparition at Knock, Mary appeared along with St. Joseph, St. John the Apostle, an altar, and a lamb. For two hours she was visible to the onlookers, but she remained completely silent. Her mere presence was a blessing at Knock, and pilgrims have been blessed by her presence there since 1879. According to testimonies, the people’s natural response was to pray the *Ave Maria*, crying out to the Blessed Mother for benediction.

This simple invocation, also known as the Hail Mary, is one of the best-known Marian prayers. The initial part of this prayer comes from the Gospel of Luke when Mary, pregnant with Jesus, sets out in haste to greet her kinswoman Elizabeth, who is pregnant with St. John the Baptist. Upon Mary’s greeting, Elizabeth, filled with the Holy Spirit, cries out in a loud voice and says, “Most blessed are you among women, and blessed is the fruit of your womb” (Lk 1:42).

Here we see the principal reason why Mary is blessed: hers was the extraordinary privilege of carrying in her womb Jesus, the Incarnate Word of God. This is made clear from Elizabeth’s next statement: “And how does this happen to me, that the mother of my Lord should come to me? For at the moment the sound of your greeting reached my ears, the infant in my womb leaped for joy” (Lk 1:43–44).

How does Mary's "blessedness" fulfill God's covenant promises to his people?

Elizabeth's words recall those spoken by King David when the ark of the covenant was brought to Jerusalem. When David sees the ark, he exclaims, "How can the ark of the LORD come to me?" (2 Sm 6:9). Mary is the living ark of the New Covenant because she is carrying the Lord Jesus, who is the foundation of the new and everlasting covenant between God and the human race.

In the Old Testament, God's people revered the ark as a sign of God's presence among them. We see one example of this in King David, who dances before the ark as he and the people shout with joy (see 2 Samuel 6:14–15). This same joy is clearly expressed by John the Baptist, who leaps in the womb of Elizabeth before Mary carrying the child Jesus (see Luke 1:44). This image of the ark is brought full circle in the book of Revelation, when the ark of God's covenant is seen within the heavenly temple (11:19), and Mary, "the woman clothed with the sun," appears (12:1).

In addition to becoming the mother of Jesus, why is Mary considered "blessed"?

In his 1987 encyclical, *Redemptoris Mater* (*Mother of the Redeemer*), Pope John Paul II offered another reason for Mary's blessedness: her great faith. Referring to the passage in scripture where Elizabeth tells Mary, "Blessed are you who believed that what was spoken to you by the Lord would be fulfilled" (Lk 1:45), the pope reflected deeply on Mary as the blessed one who believed. Speaking of Mary's obedience of faith at the Annunciation, the Holy Father wrote,

Indeed, at the Annunciation Mary entrusted herself to God completely, with the "full submission of intellect and will," manifesting "the obedience of faith" to him who spoke to her through his messenger. She responded, therefore, with

all her human and feminine “I,” and this response of faith included both perfect cooperation with “the grace of God that precedes and assists” and perfect openness to the action of the Holy Spirit, who “constantly brings faith to completion by his gifts.” . . .

Mary uttered this fiat in faith. In faith she entrusted herself to God without reserve and “devoted herself totally as the handmaid of the Lord to the person and work of her Son.” And as the Fathers of the Church teach—she conceived this Son in her mind before she conceived him in her womb: precisely in faith! Rightly therefore does Elizabeth praise Mary: “And blessed is she who believed that there would be a fulfillment of what was spoken to her from the Lord.” These words have already been fulfilled: Mary of Nazareth presents herself at the threshold of Elizabeth and Zechariah’s house as the Mother of the Son of God. This is Elizabeth’s joyful discovery: “The mother of my Lord comes to me”! (RM, 13)

As Abraham was blessed by God because of his faith, so Mary is blessed because of hers. Pope John Paul II noted that “in the salvific economy of God’s revelation, Abraham’s faith constitutes the beginning of the Old Covenant; Mary’s faith at the Annunciation inaugurates the New Covenant” (RM, 14). The *Catechism of the Catholic Church* points to the blessings that come to all the nations through the faith of Abraham and the faith of Mary: “Mary is ‘blessed among women’ because she believed in the fulfillment of the Lord’s word. Abraham, because of his faith, became a blessing for all the nations of the earth. Mary, because of her faith, became the mother of believers, through whom all nations of the earth receive him who is God’s own blessing: Jesus, the ‘fruit of thy womb’” (CCC, 2676).

How is Mary, by virtue of her blessedness, a model for us?

Pope John Paul II also points to Mary as the blessed model of those who do the “will of God” (Mk 3:35). Some have

understood Mark 3:31–35 as Jesus distancing himself from Mary because when he hears that Mary is with other members of his family asking for him, he says, “‘Who are my mother and [my] brothers?’ And looking around at those seated in the circle he said: ‘Here are my mother and my brothers. For whoever does the will of God is my brother and sister and mother’” (Mk 3:33–35). In Luke 11:28, in a response to a woman from the crowd who cries out: “Blessed is the womb that carried you and the breasts at which you nursed” (Lk 11:27), Jesus, in a similar way, says, “Blessed are those who hear the word of God and observe it.” Pope John Paul II offers this comment on these passages:

Is Jesus thereby distancing himself from his mother according to the flesh? Does he perhaps wish to leave her in the hidden obscurity which she herself has chosen? If this seems to be the case from the tone of those words, one must nevertheless note that the new and different motherhood which Jesus speaks of to his disciples refers precisely to Mary in a very special way. Is not Mary the first of “those who hear the word of God and do it”? And therefore does not the blessing uttered by Jesus in response to the woman in the crowd refer primarily to her? Without any doubt, Mary is worthy of blessing by the very fact that she became the mother of Jesus according to the flesh (“Blessed is the womb that bore you, and the breasts that you sucked”), but also and especially because already at the Annunciation she accepted the word of God, because she believed it, because she was obedient to God, and because she “kept” the word and “pondered it in her heart” (cf. Lk. 1:38, 45; 2:19, 51) and by means of her whole life accomplished it. Thus we can say that the blessing proclaimed by Jesus is not in opposition, despite appearances, to the blessing uttered by the unknown woman, but rather coincides with that blessing in the person of this Virgin Mother, who called herself only “the handmaid of the Lord” (Lk. 1:38). If it is true that “all