

Mary's Fiat

Imitating Mary's Yes

Try to imagine for a second how today's culture would respond to something like Mary's yes to the angel Gabriel when he came to ask if Mary would bear the Son of God. Would Mary update her Facebook status? Would Gabriel be tweeting the play-by-play? Would the tabloids be filled with dramatic photos of Mary and Gabriel? Or, would the blogosphere be silent, the news networks oblivious? Whatever the case, you can be sure the reaction would be disproportional to the event, since the Annunciation is an event that changed the course of history forever.

On the day the Virgin of Nazareth gave her consent to becoming the Mother of God, a cry of jubilation rose in heaven, on earth, and under the earth. Only at that moment, with Mary's agreement, could the mystery of the Incarnation

be realized. By offering her free decision, the Blessed Virgin offered the Son of God the maternal seed of life that made it possible for the Almighty to enter his creation. The Word was made flesh. A young Jewish girl agreed to the angel Gabriel's request, and God's plan for our salvation was secured. At the moment of the Annunciation, Mary set off a chain of events with far-reaching implications.

The Meaning of Mary's Fiat for Us as Christians

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When Mary said yes to God's will—her fiat—our Lord was conceived in her womb. Allowing herself to become the instrument for Jesus' Incarnation also meant becoming the instrument for God's plan of salvation for us. If the Son of God didn't become man, live, preach, suffer, and die in atonement for our sins, the gates of heaven couldn't be opened to us. Mary's becoming Mother of Christ also meant her becoming Mother of his Church, and thereby fulfilling the duties that accompany that position: to nourish and educate the People of God. All of the privileges and responsibilities given to Mary in her divine motherhood also are given to her as Mother of mankind. "The Son whom she brought forth is He whom God placed as the first-born among many brethren, namely the faithful, in whose birth and education she cooperates with a maternal love," the Church tells us in the Vatican II document *Lumen Gentium*¹. By her perpetual virginity, Mary gave up the possibility of having physical descendants in order to become spiritual Mother of the entire Church through her Son, Jesus.

Mary's universal motherhood guarantees her position as mediator and her ability to know everything about us,

including our personal needs and concerns. It's generally assumed that, because of their beatific vision, the blessed in heaven see in God a mirror image, so to speak, of whatever is of personal interest to them and their mission. For example, they're able to see what happens to their relatives and to know the intentions of the persons they care about. Of course, because of her closeness to our Lord and her role in the salvific plan, this applies to Mary even more so. She knows all of our wants and needs and has great "power" to intercede for and care for us with her tender motherly love. The fact that she was conceived without original sin and remained sinless throughout her life enables her to fulfill her task of giving and nourishing the life of grace in a sinful humanity. Because she was taken up body and soul into heaven, she's capable of caring for her children in every aspect of our lives.

Next, we as individual Christians become children of Mary at the moment of our Baptism; when we become part of Christ the Head of the Church, we become part of Mary the Heart of the Church. We receive spiritual nourishment and education as our life of grace develops, and we are invited into an intimate relationship with Mary, through which we experience her inexhaustible richness as *our* Mother. Her yes to being our Lord's Mother was also her yes to being our Mother in a collective way as Church, but more notably in a singular way as uniquely cherished children.

The Meaning of Mary's Fiat for Us as Mothers

Furthermore, Mary's fiat holds particular significance for us as mothers. Not only was it her yes to being our Mother in the

order of grace, but also it was her yes to showing us the way in our own motherhood. By agreeing to become the Mother of God, she agreed to become the ultimate example of genuine motherhood and to assist us in becoming genuine mothers, too. Mary lived a holy motherhood, and she wants us to live a holy motherhood so that, through our vocation as nurturers, educators, and spiritual guides of our families, we can effectively help to build the kingdom of God.

In Mary's fiat we can see the depth of her love for God and her willingness to follow his will regardless of the cost. The Savior would redeem Israel. How that would come about, Mary didn't know for certain, but she did know that being his Mother wouldn't be a stroll through the meadow. The land of the People of God was under Roman occupation; they were persecuted, oppressed, wanting, and helpless. They yearned for a champion to fulfill the promise of scripture: "The days are coming—oracle of the LORD—when I will fulfill the promise I made to the house of Israel and the house of Judah" (Jer 33:14); and "I will rescue you from the hand of the wicked, and ransom you from the power of the violent" (Jer 15:21). The people of Israel believed that God would send a redeemer to save them from their affliction. Whether the Redeemer's victory would be won physically through rebellion or spiritually through conversion, no one knew. Regardless, it would require much from Mary as his Mother.

Perhaps she could have been a trifle nervous. Although Mary had unparalleled faith, she also was completely human and subject to the same emotions as other humans beings. Don't we all at least get the jitters when given a huge responsibility?

I remember the day I found out I was pregnant with our first child. I kind of *knew* I was pregnant, but at that time, home

pregnancy tests weren't reliable and the only way to know for certain was to go to the doctor. Sitting in the reception room awaiting the test results, I was absolutely elated. I knew that motherhood was in God's plan for me, and if I was pregnant, I would welcome the child with a joyous heart. On the other hand, I was scared stiff. Trailing my older siblings by several years, and being the youngest of most of the cousins, I wasn't around small children much while growing up. How would I know how to take care of a little one? For as much as I wanted a child, I was afraid of the responsibility.

I heard the receptionist call my name, and I swallowed hard. My knees wobbled as I made my way up to the desk. I breathed in deeply and let it out slowly, deliberately.

"I'm Margaret Fenelon," I said meekly.

"Your pregnancy test was positive. Congratulations, you're pregnant," the lady behind the desk said.

I was shocked, overjoyed, and terrified, all rolled into one. "Holy mackerel!" I shouted. Okay, I actually shouted holy something else, but that's beside the point. The old lady snoozing in her chair jolted upright and stared at me with big, questioning eyes. The little girl playing with the wooden alphabet puzzle at the kids' table moved over and grabbed her mom's skirt hem. The middle-aged gentleman leaned forward and examined me over the top of his newspaper. The receptionist's jaw dropped nearly to the floor.

"Um . . . that's okay, isn't it?" she asked, concerned. I suppose they didn't get many reactions like mine.

"You bet it is!" I blurted out. "Yes, it is! Oh! My goodness! I've got to go tell my husband!" I ran out of the clinic, all heads turned in my direction, wide eyes on me the whole way. I flittered across the parking lot, jumped into our car, and drove

frantically home, rehearsing over and over the words I'd say to Mark to announce the conception of our firstborn.

I can't imagine Mary had the frantic reaction I had, but I bet that, upon conceiving our Lord in her womb, she felt the weight of the responsibility. She probably felt that initial "Oh! My goodness!" as I did when I found out I'd conceived my firstborn. I can even guess she paused to consider how she'd handle not only motherhood, but also divine motherhood. Could it be that her words to the angel Gabriel, "How can this be, since I have no relations with a man?" (Lk 1:34), had more behind it than the fact she was a virgin? In addition to her virginity, she was an unwed mother, had never been a mother before, and the child she was to bear wasn't just any child; he was to be the God-Man. How's that for daunting responsibility?

Yet Mary accepted the angel's proposal without hesitation because she wanted God's will to be fulfilled in her life—and consequently our lives—more than anything else. She didn't ask for time to think about it, she didn't suggest that someone else take her place, and she certainly didn't say no! This sets precedent for us as mothers, especially if we want to follow in Mary's footsteps, figuratively speaking. Mary wanted God's will above all things, and so should we.

Saying Our Own Fiat

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One of the first steps to becoming a mother like Mary is to adopt her same attitude toward our mutual Father. Based on the way Mary responded to the Holy Spirit, it seems pretty clear she had a very strong bond with God already in place.

This bond came with a certain level of understanding that she could rely on God to want what is best for her. Yet Mary likely struggled with the same trepidations that you or I would if an angel appeared to us and asked us to bear the Son of God. Just like you and I do, Mary had a vision for her future. She was probably giddy at the idea of becoming Joseph's wife and sharing a home and life with him. She likely imagined raising children to love and serve God. Surely she dreamed of growing old with her husband.

And yet she had to give up all of this when she said yes to God's will. When she became God's handmaid, she *surrendered* the plans she had for herself in lieu of the agenda given by her creator. Can you imagine forgoing all the plans you have made for your life in just a moment's time? Can you picture yourself giving up the idea of a dream wedding, a picture perfect birth, and a joy-filled adventure with your husband? It wouldn't be easy, would it?

In my experience, the first step to *letting go* as Mary modeled so beautifully with her fiat is to trust God. Trust, as you probably know, only comes with time and knowledge of oneself and he who is to be trusted. So if you find yourself anxious about turning everything over to God, know this much: First, be patient with yourself. These things take time. Second, you are not alone. Mary struggled too. Third, the more you come to know your Father, the more you will love and trust him. Lastly, when you love and trust Jesus, surrendering your life to him will come more naturally.

Try not to be discouraged if you find yourself scared in the beginning. These are uncharted territories for you and your relationship with God, and it's normal to be afraid of the unknown; but rest assured that he who is all-knowing is

waiting for you to come to him, to trust him with your greatest desires and deepest fears. And when you find yourself unable to pray the prayer, "let your will be done," try starting with something a little simpler like, "give me the grace to desire your will."

Motherhood as a Vocation

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If you're reading this book, it's likely that you've already accepted the idea that God's will is for you to be a mother of some sort. Maybe you have given birth to one or many children. Perhaps you're pregnant with your first. You could even be an adoptive or spiritual mother, in which case you have many souls you pray for and nurture. Whatever your circumstances, God has given you a gift in being a mother. It may not always feel like a gift (especially when your house is a wreck, no one is listening to you, and your task list seems endless), but part of the beauty of Christianity is the idea that suffering is a doorway to grace. Such is the life of a mother sometimes, and such was certainly the life of Mary.

In this way, motherhood is a vocation. It is a unique calling from God that sets us on the path to union with Christ. Sometimes it doesn't feel like a calling though. And for some women, maternity doesn't seem to suit them. They don't feel like they are fit to be mothers, and they don't feel any sort of inclination toward nurturing. On the other hand, there are many women who feel a strong yearning to bear children and a natural proclivity for mothering, yet their bodies are unable to sustain a pregnancy.