

Preface

For the past few years I have written a mom's column for www.catholicmom.com. As a mother of six and now grandmother of five, I have lots of stories stored away in that special place near my heart. It isn't that I'm an expert on motherhood—far from it—but I do have stories to share, and in sharing my stories I hope it opens the doors for others to share their life stories.

I no longer have six children running throughout my home, with all the drama that each day presented back then. Now my mornings consist of watching the dawn arrive with a cup of coffee and my rosary. Within the stillness of this part of the day I pray for those God so lovingly placed in my life. My mind wanders as I think of my children, my grandchildren, and my friends and family, as well as my own faith journey.

It is during such quiet moments that I also get ideas for writing, and I believe during my praying of the rosary Mary's presence is felt in our connection as women and mothers. I hope my words encourage others to seek quiet moments in their lives because out of it one's own faith can emerge that can be written and shared with others.

Introduction

So often Mary is put up on such a high pedestal that she seems to be unreachable, or simply out of the realm of everyday people. I believe this is a misconception because Mary speaks to not only the strength and simplicity of motherhood but also her life reflects the teachings of her son. She is a woman who said yes to God's messenger when most would have said no. She was given no promises. God did not tell Mary that she would be given a royal status or luxurious lifestyle or even a pain-free existence if she agreed to conceive and give birth to His son. Mary understands, cares, and relates to all the ups and downs, the joys and fears, and the happiness and sorrows of life, because she lived a life as a woman, wife, and mother. She and Joseph faced so much of what families face today—uncertainty, poverty, instability of governments, which often times includes discrimination, betrayal, and the everyday challenges of surviving life.

On that Good Friday at the cross Mary experienced the most piercing pain any mother could endure. At Jesus' circumcision, upon hearing the prophet's prediction of a sword piercing her heart, did Mary comprehend how her heart would have been so pierced; even if she did, would she have said "no" to Gabriel's message from God? Mothers around our world face the challenges of a child's illness, a child's pain or limitations, and sometimes even a child's death—a piercing of the heart that forever bleeds. Would these women have said "no" to being their child's mother? I doubt it.

Motherhood isn't about birthing a child—that is a biological function. Motherhood is about giving life to a child, nurturing, caring, and (when the time comes) letting the child go to live his or her own life. Whether a woman conceives a child in her body or in her heart, her life is forever changed.

Reflecting with Mary through her annunciation, her pregnancy, her birthing of Jesus, the flight to Egypt, and the many challenges of motherhood—from losing Jesus at the temple to letting him

go and watching him leave her home to pursue his ministry—is like opening a journal of shared memories into my motherhood, my faith journey.

While I share my own reflections with Mary, anyone can connect with her through life experiences. There is a common sisterhood shared in motherhood with Mary, but there is also common humanity with her.

When I reach for my rosary and my cup of coffee, I invite Mary into my home, and I invite her into my heart . . . to share memories with another woman, another mother, a mentor.

Called to Ministry

This morning in the quietness of the dawn I sit with music softly playing. Tears fill my eyes, and I begin to weep. These are tears of joy because I feel so blest. One of my six children's birthday is today. Six times a year I sit and remember each pregnancy, each labor, each feeling of the ultimate love of life as each child was placed into my arms, and I allow the tears of joy to flow. (from my journal)

As I pray my rosary I think of my children, and soon I can imagine Mary's presence joining me as though we share our memories together. . . .

My memories go back more than 30 years and begin with the birth of my oldest child. I remember being so very excited and happy, as well as scared. The thought of carrying a life within me was so phenomenal, and after nine months I would be bringing life into this world and then would be responsible for that life. It was almost too overwhelming and yet so wonderful. We are all called to ministry, and I believed mine was to be a mom.

I imagine Mary having all the same feelings I did about pregnancy and birthing, and I am sure living with her cousin Elizabeth during their pregnancies gave Mary some insight into what was going to be happening to her. One can only imagine the conversations of these two women about their babies, birthing, and the unknown. With Zechariah losing his ability to speak, which probably rendered him less than effective in the communication department, it was just as much a blessing for Elizabeth, as it was for Mary, to have someone to confide in during the joys and uncertainties of pregnancy.

During my first pregnancy I heard horror stories that could have come straight from a Stephen King novel regarding the birthing process. Fortunately I had a wonderful doctor who when confronted with my fears kept telling me everything was going to be fine and that he would be with me throughout the whole labor and birth. I'm sure Elizabeth reassured Mary not to worry, and I'm sure Joseph kept reassuring Mary that he would be with her throughout her labor and birth.

Mary's pregnancy was no different than any other woman's. Yes, she was carrying the Son of God, but that did not shield her from worrying or dreaming about the child within. The waiting for that moment to see and touch the life growing within can be wondrous and also frightful. I

sense Mary felt all of this, just like me, just like any mother expecting her child. The only thing Mary knew for sure was that her child was a male child. Who would he look like? Will he be healthy? How much will he weigh? The list of “wonderings” is unlimited.

The day of delivery of my first child arrived with a series of changes within my body that I had never experienced before. While Mary, I’m sure was dealing with the same feelings and experiences, she also was riding on a donkey during a difficult trip to an unknown destination when she was about to give birth. At least I didn’t have to deal with that, but the drive to the hospital was an adventure unto its own. During the drive, there were curves in the road that felt like twists and turns on the Indy 500; the bumps in the road felt like giant potholes; and the constant stopping and starting at traffic lights was like riding a bumper car at an amusement park. Even with all of this happening, I suspect sitting on a donkey was a far bit more uncomfortable.

All these feelings of fear and uncertainty about giving birth—the uncomfortable moments and yes, the moments of pain—ended with my final push, the sound of my daughter’s first cry, and having her placed in my arms. I looked at this new life who had just come out of my body, and I cried . . . not in pain, but in pure joy. It was at that very moment I became one with my Creator. It was the ultimate, the most wondrous of joyous pains that I had ever experienced in my life. I sense the same with Mary—the joy she must have felt in that stable when she gave that final push and Joseph placed Jesus in her arms. I believe she too cried not in pain but in pure joy.

As a young girl in school, I was taught by the nuns that Mary did not experience labor pains or the “normal” birthing of a child. Jesus sort of just happened. When I became a mother, older and hopefully wiser, I began to wonder why Mary would be shielded from the joyful pain of birth but be allowed to experience the horrible pain of watching her son be tortured to death on a cross. It never made sense to me. For many women giving birth to a baby is a joy beyond the pain. And while I write of giving birth physically I also know the women who conceive and bear a child in their heart through adoption experience similar pains of waiting, wondering, and ultimately the joy of the child placed in their arms.

With each of my children I made up a lullaby that I hummed and sang to them when they cried. During those moments nothing outside my arms could hurt them, for my love was their protection. I thought of how it must have been for Mary that dark night when she gave birth to Jesus. How she wrapped him and held him close to her heart and perhaps she too began to soothe his cries with her voice—a lullaby she herself made up or was sung to her as a child. In any event, I can see Jesus looking up into his mother’s eyes and then drifting off to sleep—secure in her love.

As a mother I know I can never totally protect my children from the world outside my arms. Mary knew deep in her own heart that she could never totally protect Jesus from the world outside her arms, but her love was his security.

In the stillness of a night
Mary cradles her newborn son.
Gently kissing his face

she sings her lullaby.

Jesus gazes upon his mother's face,
her voice soothes his fears,
her fingers wipe away his tears.
Cuddling him close to her heart
Mary comforts her Son.

Jesus gives one fleeting glance
into his mother's eyes
then quietly drifts off to sleep.
The bond of love is strong.

The world outside his mother's arms
is filled with uncertainty,
but cradled in Mary's arms
Jesus sleeps, secured from what is
and what will be.

It is her touch, her voice,
her lullaby
that comforts our Savior,
as it resonates throughout the night—
a mother's lullaby.

By Susan Handle Terbay

As I finish my rosary this morning, the memories of my pregnancies fade away as I look out the window toward the sun in the eastern sky and drink my last swallow of coffee. I sense Mary sitting with me and smiling as she hums quietly the lullaby she sang to Jesus, both of us filled with the memories of the gifts of the lives bestowed upon us.

Reflective Thoughts

“Upon arriving, the angel said to her: Rejoice, O highly favored daughter! The Lord is with you. Blessed are you among women” (Lk 1:28).

Who came into my life, or what announcement was given to me that forever changed my life?

“Elizabeth was filled with the Holy Spirit and cried out in a loud voice: Blest are you among women and blest is the fruit of your womb” (Lk 1:41-42).

Who are the Elizabeths in my life?