

*The Potter's Flask*  
*Reflections on the Blessed Virgin Mary*



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## Introduction

*"We are in truth caught between two fires. You are probably aware of that expression, taken from military language, which indicates the position of an army attacked simultaneously from the rear and in front. For us it is the fire of love that besieges us on all sides. In front of us is the Father's face, the Blessed Trinity waiting for us; behind, the virginal love of Mary, offering us to God. The spiritual life consists precisely in allowing ourselves to be led, lifted up and borne by those maternal hands, so that we may be presented to the eternal Father. ... Mary lifts us up in her arms and presents us to the Father. He gazes unceasingly at us, and we at him. This 'face to face' is the highest form of the interior life: it is thus that St. Paul describes heaven. We shall no longer see him, he says, in the mirror of creatures, but 'face to face.' When we live under his glance, all that we do is lit up; everything becomes clearer and more translucent."*

—A Carthusian

Being outflanked is always an army's greatest fear. When Ulysses S. Grant in the American Civil War was besieging the city of Vicksburg from May through July 1863, he constantly kept a division—William Sherman's—out of the action and to his rear to prevent another Confederate force from hitting him from behind as had almost happened at the battle of Shiloh the previous year. It never happened. The Union army was safe and the Confederate force in the city along the Mississippi River surrendered.

In the spiritual life our goal is precisely to be outflanked. It is the Virgin Mary taking us from behind and, as we read above, lifting us, as we are, to the Father. It is the intent of these reflections to simply make you comfortable with Mary so that she can present you to God, the way she presented the child Jesus in the temple.

These are not small reflections for each day as in prior writings. Rather, these are longer reflections based on an image of art. The interpretation is solely mine and is meant to encourage you to do the same for yourself. You'll exhaust my writing after a brief while—you could read the whole document in one sitting—but look deeply and lastingly at the paintings. Return to the image throughout the week. See what strikes you. Knowing what you do of Mary and Jesus, what are some connections you can make between the painting and the love of God for you? The connections you make will be inspired by the Holy Spirit. The current state of your heart is different from mine. You will see and feel something that I cannot. Trust that God is speaking to you.

Some years ago a number of artists were asked the question, "What is art?" Andy Warhol, a Catholic, responded, "Art? Isn't that a man's name?"

You might not consider yourself skilled in prayer or in art, but you have intuition that is trustworthy. Intuition allows you to see something deeper than what is on the surface. See *and feel* what is behind Manet's two flowers above, and you will be taken to another realm. Mary can assist you.

JFW  
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(Image on Front: *Branch of White Peonies and Secateurs*, Edouard Manet, 1864, Paris)  
(Image on Back: *Mary's Cross*, Daniel Thomas Paulos, 1992, Albuquerque)

The Week of April 28



*Annunciation*, il Guercino, 1646, Bologna

*"The man will dream, the woman will do. Man plans and envisions, woman executes plans and keeps the vision bright even in the very midst of a host of drab details."*

*—Mother Mary Francis*

Most baroque depictions of the Annunciation have Gabriel and Mary interacting. Gabriel typically confronts the Blessed Virgin, perhaps with a finger raised, while Mary looks down to the earth, humbly covering her breast. But not in the painting of Giovanni Francesco Barbieri (also known as "il Guercino") from 1646, currently residing above a side altar in a small church outside Bologna. Here Mary is in isolation, while the main interchange occurs between God and his messenger.

A snapshot of the situation just prior to the announcement, Guercino portrays God the Father in consultation with the Archangel. Mary prayerfully reads from the Old Testament, oblivious to the drama above. The reaction of the Father is almost one of astonishment; surprise at just how holy and pure this maiden is. He knew there had to be a fit dwelling for his Son, but a totally spotless woman!? One even purer than Eve!? Indeed!

Gabriel, however, is not surprised. In fact, he is ready to bestow the lily upon Mary.

As the viewer lowers his focus to the Virgin, he sees a deeply contented individual. Mary is not restless for a change, she is not sad with her circumstances, and she is not dismayed with her spiritual life. She reads engagingly, holding her finger in place for the ending, as any intrigued reader would do. She doesn't lounge conceitedly or presumptuously, but reads on her knees, though her penance is not excruciating as her countenance is tranquil. Mary's clothes are modest, neither extravagant nor poor. The table is not bare, as would be seen in a poor hut, but the tablecloth is earthy and certainly not ornate. Mary is simply in her "drab" life, and she is satisfied with it.

Gabriel will say to Mary, "You have found favor with God." God, who is self-sufficient and all-creating, is enhanced by this humble maiden. How extraordinary! God did not merely tolerate the Virgin of Nazareth. He was delighted by her. It is the same delight he will have with his Son at the baptism when he proclaimed, "You are my Beloved Son, with you I am well pleased." It is the same delight he has with each of us from the moment of our baptism and incorporation into Christ.

We have found favor with God. We, like Mary, are beautiful in the eyes of God. The Father desires to incarnate his Son in us. Gabriel is poised to knight us with the lily rod. We need not look up and wait. We need not hope painfully. Our penances need not bring us anguish. We need simply pray, read, and live our lives in a normally holy way. Accept the drab world and circumstances around you. They are good.

The Blessed Mother will assure us the Father and his angels speak favorably of us while we live our lives. She will eliminate our scruples and shame. She will help us truly believe in our heart that God sees within us a fundamental openness and trust, and that is what makes us fit dwellings for the Lord. We are not perfect, but we, deep down, seek first to do the Lord's will. We are not selfish people. We are truly good and giving. That is enough for the Lord.

God wants us to *enjoy* our lives. Mary was doing just that when Gabriel appeared to her. Her life was made even better by the divine seed planted within her. Allow the Blessed Mother to erase your guilt and foster your joy. She will help you to hear the good things God is saying of you.

The Week of May 5th



*Pentecost*, Studio of Simon Marmion, 1485, London

*"The heart of Mary is the beginning of the story: in her heart was performed a secret, what now at Pentecost is open to the gaze of all mankind. The heart of Mary is the original upper room, where redeemed mankind is gathered."*

*–Hugo Rahner*

This illuminated manuscript from a 15th Century French artist of humble origins depicts "the disciples gathered together in prayer, together with Mary, the Mother of Jesus" (Acts 1:14). Mary stands in the apostolic throng, as if she is on a crowded subway. She is not, however, lost in the tumult. Standing above the rest, her head is covered, unlike the others, and her vibrant blue and white clothing stands out from the dull beiges and greens of the apostles. The "Queen of the Apostles" looks down, while the others look up in wonder. Mary is not intrigued by the spectacle. She contains the flame of the Holy Spirit already within her. While Peter and James protect their eyes from the flash of light, Mary prayerfully folds them across her breast, protecting the Spirit in her womb, as she once protected the eternal Word made flesh.

Last month, thousands of men, women, and children across the country stared up at the sky in the middle of the day in amazement. It was not the fire of the Holy Spirit that entranced them, but the partially blocked sun of a solar eclipse. They were fascinated by a ring of electrum in the sky. The earth turned dark for four minutes and then people went back to their daily lives. Not the apostles. The earth brightened during that period of the outpouring of heaven, and their lives were forever changed. Peter and the apostles who once were timid and uneducated in the scriptures now became eloquent masters. They were wedded to the mission of the master. They would never return to their former way of living, never again deny the Lord, never again hide in a locked upper room. A torch was set ablaze in their hearts at Pentecost and the apostles would bring that light to the dark world.

Mary is at the heart of this scene. She is at the heart of the apostles' conversion. The apostles would always have the Holy Spirit within them from here on out. But they would turn to Mary for strength and wisdom time and again subsequently.

In the illuminated manuscript, the Blessed Mother looks both to her heart, where God resides, and to Saint John in the foreground. "Woman, behold your son," Jesus had spoken from the cross. John stands for all of us. Mary looks to us to ensure we too will receive the Holy Spirit; that we too will return to her for strength and wisdom.

Spend this week focusing your eyes on Mary. She will direct you to the real heavens. She will help you peer into eternity. She will still your restless eyes and bodies. She will emblazon the Holy Spirit in your heart. You will be in that upper room and your heart will be open to receiving the Holy Spirit. Your life will be changed and you will have meaning. And you will do as she and the apostles did—increase the Church.

The Week of May 12



*Mother with Child*, Pablo Picasso, 1901, Chicago

*"Perhaps another question needs first to be asked: If God loves us equally when we are bad and when we are good, then why be good? This is an interesting question, though not a deep one. Love, understood properly, is never a reward for being good. Goodness, rather, is always a consequence of having been loved. We are not loved because we are good, but hopefully we become good as we experience love."*

–Ronald Rolheiser

At a certain point in time a person asks himself, *Am I loved? Am I desired? Am I good?* Perhaps the question comes when he or she is a teenager. Perhaps the question is asked later in life. Everything rides on the answer to this question.

To answer in the negative is to set oneself on the course of slavery. *No, I am not loved; no, I am not desired; no, I am not good* means either my life is over or that I have to work to earn the love, desire, and respect. We will thenceforth be driven. We will be overachievers at best, never satisfied with our standing, and always on shifting ground. Any failure will drive home our deepest fear, plunging us into darkness. Any success will only be a mirage, interpreted as a condescending and deceitful offering from a pitying mate.

To answer in the positive, however, will set us on a rainbow, so to speak. Life will be free, lovely, lighthearted, and joyful. *Yes, I am loved; yes, I am desired; yes, I am good* means we can be at peace. Someone has brought us into this world intentionally. They have done the good work in us. We can live in confidence and trust.

There is one correct answer to these questions. Only the presence of a mother can assure we answer in the positive. For a mother always sees and says to the child the goodness in him or her. The Blessed Mother confirms the truth within us, that we are good and wanted.

Wanted by whom? Jesus, of course. But also *the Church*. We are wanted by the Church. So many of us doubt our role and our standing in the Church. Well, Mary, the Mother of the Church, speaks to us that the Church too finds us good, lovable, and desirable. Listen to Mary say to you, "the Church needs you."

Pablo Picasso painted many versions of *Madonna and Child* during his "blue period." This was a difficult time in his life, a period of darkness and depression. He had lost a loved one, was struggling with his career, and found God and the Church very distant. Catholicism in Southern Spain in the early 20th Century was, to use one writer's characterization, "exasperated." It was a spirituality that emphasized negative responses to those fundamental questions. It was a Church too entwined with the state. Picasso and others were bent over and burdened by this demanding and critical view of God, of Catholicism.

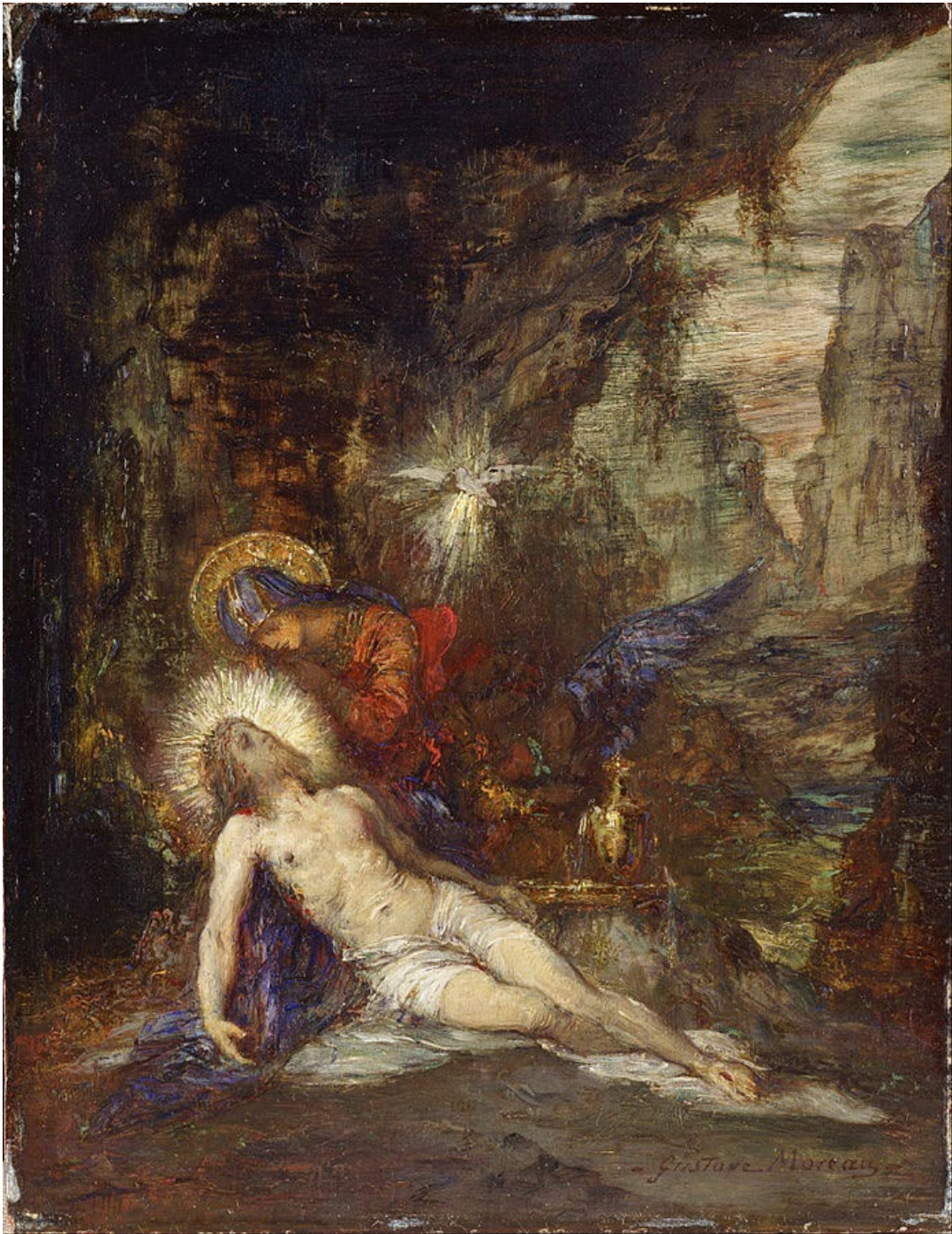
The mother in the above image is similarly bent over. She feels the weight of the critical attitude around her. She is in poverty, as the bare room indicates, but she shows tender affection for her child. She grasps his head with one hand and holds the child's hand with the other, while soothingly kissing the head. The child pines for this affirmation. It gives him strength and nourishment. The child stands upright and is ensconced in white.

The world around us tells us we are never enough. Earn more money. Lose more weight. Buy nicer clothes. Have more popular friends. We can feel the Church saying the same. Pray better. Go to church more. Evangelize.

Mary frees us from this suffocating way of living. She takes us out of the blue and assures us the world and church are made for us, not us for them.



The Week of May 19



*Pietà*, Gustave Moreau, 1876, Tokyo

*Have pity, You alone whom I adore  
From down this black pit where my heart is sped,  
A sombre universe ringed round with lead  
Where fear and curses the long night explore.  
—Charles Beaudelaire*

Gustave Moreau (1826-1898) was one of the leading artists of the symbolist movement of the 19th Century. A reaction to realism, materialism and rationalism, symbolism represented a subject or theme through a separate image. It originally began as a French literary movement with poets like Mallarmé and Beaudelaire. Art, symbolists believed, should reflect an emotion or idea. The artist's inner feeling should come through in the piece. There is something more to the painting than what meets the eye.

Our Lady of Sorrows made the ultimate sacrifice. Mary allowed her son to die. All sons die, but few mothers witness their deaths, let alone consent to it. Mary did, and so her suffering was unlike any other's. Mary agreed to the cross, knowing her son's earlier words, "unless the grain of wheat falls to the ground and dies, it bears no fruit." The pain, the desolation, the darkness!

We have all made sacrifices in our life. We have let go of something we desired or of someone we loved. We knew it was not meant to be, not meant to last forever. God was calling us to something else, to a new phase of life. It was part of God's will. We could not cling to our life and keep it. "He who loses his life will save it."

On Moreau's Calvary Mary sits alone with her dead son. Or does she cradle him in the tomb? There are no Roman soldiers, no disciples, no onlookers, no cross. One cannot help but notice the resemblance of the surroundings to the cave at Bethlehem. The dim sky appears through the crack in the rock wall in the upper righthand corner of the image. Swaddling clothes furl along the ground. A canister of myrrh, a gift from the magi that will be used to anoint the corpse, glows on a pedestal. Mary alone with her child. Christmas and Easter. Birth and death. The entry into eternity.

If birth commences the march to death, death commences the inexorable march to the Resurrection. Without Calvary there is no Eucharist. The soft whiteness of Christ' dead body resembles the whiteness of a host. Mary holds the body as the priest holds the Eucharist above the altar. The Holy Spirit, in the form of a dove, hovers over the grieving mother, as the Holy Spirit hovers at Mass. We all receive and are given life by this crushed grain of wheat. We are transformed to be mothers of God; to not just hold Christ in his death, but to hold others as well.

Symbolists shared a weariness and skepticism towards the decadence of the modern society around them. The flat, broad strokes of the brush to make abstract shapes with blurred and unmodulated colors forced the viewer to escape the scene and use the heart or imagination. A decadent society flees from the cross. It seeks pleasure and comfort. Sacrifice is abhorred. "If you want it, go for it," the decadent attitude says. *Pietà* challenges us to embrace our pain. Be alone with God. You will emerge from the black pit. The long night will end.

The Week of May 26



*Woman with a Parasol - Madame Monet and Her Son*, Claude Monet, 1875, Washington DC

*"To go more and more to souls, approaching them with respect and delicacy, touching them with love. To try always to understand everything and everyone. Not to argue; to work instead through contact and example; to dissipate prejudice, to reveal God and make Him felt without speaking of Him; to strengthen one's intelligence, to enlarge one's soul more and more; to love without tiring, in spirit of disappointment and indifference. Above all, to draw to oneself the humble and the little ones so as to lead them to Him who loves them so much. Deep, unalterable respect for souls; never to do them violence, however gentle one tries to be, but to open wide one's soul to show the light in it and the truth that lives there, and to let that creative truth enlighten and transform, without any merit of our own but simply by the fact of its presence in us."*

–*Elisabeth Leseur*

When an individual is filled with the love of God they begin to lose sight of themselves. They are swept up in doing the Lord's will and serving his people. The devoted individual is no longer afraid, self-absorbed, or self-seeking. He does not care about his reputation or popularity. She is not concerned about her comfort or even her own needs and desires. God has filled the lens of the committed disciple, the way the woman fills the canvas in Monet's portrait.

At some point in our spiritual lives we are all invited to this level. It requires sacrifice and death to our ego, and so few will accept this invitation. Many will prefer to cling to their lives, cling to the things they can control, cling to comfort and security. God will still love them, yes, but they will have settled for the merry-go-round. Those who abandon themselves, take a risk, and serve God, even if it means the cross, ride the rollercoaster.

Being consumed by the love of God is the life we want to live. Mary will help us live it. She will gently take our hand and release the clenched fist, so we can drop whatever we grasp. She will eradicate our fear, our selfishness, our anxiety. She will allow us to trust. She will prompt us to truly love our brothers and sisters. She will give us the courage and boldness to speak the truth in love and to serve the world around us. She will open our ears to listen to her son's voice, so we can do his will and attract others as he attracted them. She will conform our hearts to be like his, making us good shepherds.

One looks at Monet's portrait of his wife and son and is struck by the contrasts. At first blush, the image appears gentle and mild, pleasant and soothing. The mother is in a soft white dress with a delicate parasol; the boy in a suit, cap, and bowtie. Clearly they are not undertaking any strenuous activity. They are on a Sunday spring stroll through the garden. The sun is not too strong and the flowers not overwhelmingly wild.

And yet, there is frenzy in the image. This is anything but serene. The whipped clouds mimic the mother's dress. Even some of the wind streaks across her face. She turns as if offering an invitation to advance. Her eyes make it more of a challenge. She is hopeful the onlooker will accept; will come out of their sheltered place and progress into the field. The boy is perhaps more doubtful. There is almost a hint of melancholy or sorrow in his countenance, as his shoulders are drooped and his face is stern. Neither he nor mother are smiling. It is as if the boy is anticipating the decline of the offer. Or, he is realistic about what awaits those who accept the invitation to die to themselves and follow Christ: the cross.

Happiness awaits us in the next life. Love awaits us now. Serving God in his mission, as Mary did, will set us up for love now and happiness later. It will plunge us into the garden.

