

In the name of ✠ Jesus.

“Hail Mary, full of grace. The Lord is with thee. Blessed art thou amongst women and blessed is the fruit of thy womb, Jesus.” These are the opening words of the prayer said to Mary by Roman Catholics—sometimes as satisfactions to be performed to complete the Sacrament of Penance: say “this many” Hail Marys and “that many” Our Fathers; but often simply as prayers offered devotionally.

I can recite the Hail Mary — that shows the power of repetition in learning. I didn't try to learn it, but when I was at the seminary, I did my fieldwork in Sherwood, OH (John Zimmerman did his there, too). It was a bit of a drive, and we had to start early to get there on time. Marge and I would turn on the radio for the drive. Now there wasn't much on the radio at that time as one headed on Hwy 37 towards Hickville, OH. We essentially had the choice of two stations. One had some so-called evangelical preacher that wouldn't know the evangel if it were handed to him. We couldn't put up with that. The other station had a group of Roman Catholic nuns praying the rosary. We listened to the rosary.

I know. I know. Someone told us recently. “You could have just turned the radio off and talked to each other.” But we didn't. We listened to the Hail Marys over and over, and because of that I know it.

Now, you might have recognized the first part of this portion of the Hail Mary; those words come from the angel Gabriel's greeting to Mary that we have in our text today. In our text, he doesn't call Mary by name yet, and so our text translates his greeting this way: “*Greetings, O favored one, the Lord is with you!*” The second part of this portion of the Hail Mary are Elizabeth's words of greeting to Mary. The ESV translates it: “*Blessed are you among women, and blessed is the fruit of your womb*” (Luke 1:42). You can see that this part of the Hail Mary accurately translates the text, but also rightly identifies the fruit of Mary's womb; it's Jesus.

So when it comes to the first portion of the Hail Mary, being words from the Bible, there's not too much with which to quibble with our Roman Catholic friends. They're words from the Scripture, except that the words “full of grace” don't capture the meaning of the Greek participle *κεχαριτωμένη*. “Full of grace” comes from the Latin Vulgate translation, *gratia plena*.

But the idea that Mary was herself “full of grace,” immaculately conceived, and a worthy vessel to bear the Savior of the world, completely misses the point of the angel's message as reflected in this passive voice participle. Yes, Mary was a virgin, but that didn't fill her up with grace either. In Roman Catholic theology,

there is a desire to have Mary filled up with enough grace, that she might be able to dispense that grace to others.

But again, that completely misses the point. Mary isn't full of grace herself. She is the one receiving the grace of God in this transaction. She is being favored. She was the "most highly favored lady" as Gabriel would say moments later: "*you have found favor with God.*"

Was there anything about Mary's person or her womb that made her worthy to be the Ark of the New Testament? Or chosen to be the Mother of God? Not according to her flesh, no! Mary was a sinner as much as her primordial mother Eve was, and she needed the head-crushing work of the woman's offspring as much as the mother of all the living did and all of her descendents. Indeed, it's because Mary was a sinner that her spirit would later rejoice in God her Savior (Luke 1:47).

But if Mary was a sinner, then that means that God chose her in spite of her sin. It means that the holy Son of God abided with sinners from His conception on. It was not that the flesh He received from Mary was sinful—no, He knew no sin, says St. Paul (2 Cor. 5:21). Conceived by the Holy Spirit, neither the sin of Adam was in Him (1 John 3:5), nor did He commit any sin (1 Pet. 2:22). Rather, the angel said, "*the child to be born will be called holy.*"

The womb of a sinless Mary was not necessary for Jesus to remain sinless. Like us, Jesus was sorely tempted, but unlike us, He remained without sin. In His ministry Jesus would surround Himself with tax collectors and sinners, and yet He did not sin—how different are we who become whom we associate with, as the saying goes. Jesus did not revile when reviled—how about you? He did not threaten when He suffered (1 Pet:2:23)—and you? No, He remained sinless, and His sinlessness is surely necessary for His obedience to substitute for our disobedience, but a sinless Mary is completely unnecessary for a sinless Son, and it is unsupported by Scripture.

On the other hand, Mary's flesh was absolutely necessary for our salvation, for it was there, within the confines of Mary's womb, that the Son born of Mary would be handed down sin's death sentence, for by Mary the Son of the Most High would become mortal, and by God's own plan would suffer and die. This is the way He would save His people from their sins—first, by becoming the seed of woman, of Mary His mother, and second, by bruising His heel unto death, but, by this death, crushing the head of our enemies and winning the ultimate victory that removes the terror of death from us and promises everlasting refreshment by springs of living water.

This is why we hail Mary today, not because she is full of grace, but because God's favor toward her in the fullness of time has redounded to His favor to the world, and especially to us today. For *“God sent forth his Son, born of [a] woman [named Mary], born under the law, to redeem those who were under the law, so that we might receive adoption as sons”* (Gal. 4:4-5). May we hear this word and receive it in faith as Mary did, *“let it be to me according to Your word.”*

And God grant that we may humbly hear and believe the word of God that tells us where Jesus is to be found today, where His grace is distributed—no longer in the Virgin's womb, but in humble bread and wine—Christ's body in the bread and the blood of the New Testament in the wine. In these, the Lord is with us with His grace, favoring us sinners with forgiveness and promising life to us who die—*“For nothing will be impossible with God.”*

In the name of the Father and of the ✠ Son and of the Holy Spirit. Amen.