

How to be a Handmaid of the Lord, Like Mary

Prepare: Read Luke 1:26-38

In the story of the Annunciation, we see the moment when Mary became a vessel in which God the Son, Jesus Christ would dwell during the nine months of pregnancy.

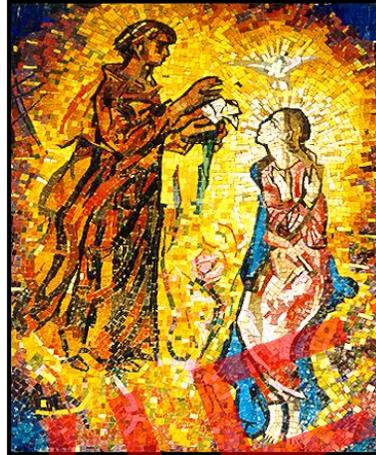
Her "yes" to the special vocation of serving the kingdom of God as the mother of the Messiah did not end when her Son died on the cross, for that is when she became mother to the whole Church.

God planned her vocation at the beginning of our story in Genesis, when he told the serpent, "I will put enmity between you and the woman, and between your offspring and hers" (Gen. 3:15). She said yes to that vocation when she said to the angel Gabriel and to God, "Behold, I am the handmaid of the Lord. Let it be done to me according to Your word" (Luke 1:38).

To get a deeper understanding of what her fiat, her "yes" entailed — and what happens when we say "yes" to God — we need to look at the word "handmaid." What did she mean by that? According to the dictionary, a "handmaid" is someone whose essential function is to assist. ASSIST! Not: Take charge of. Not: Become the Savior of. Not: Be such a good priest or lay minister or religious brother/sister that people admire you and give you the credit for a job well done.

An assistant is often called the employer's "right hand" or, more literally, an extension of the employer's hand.

When I am given an assignment by God, such as "Write a book about ..." or "Give a retreat about ...", my first inclination is to kick into high gear all the organizational and leadership skills in which God has endowed me and trained me. When I see someone wandering into darkness and God nudges me to intervene, my strong sense of caring moves me to action, and if I don't see results fast enough (by my definition of it), I start assuming that I'm not trying hard enough and must push into higher gear.



None of this is being a handmaid of the Lord. None of this is being an extension of God's hand. It's me being me, stretching out my own hand to see how far I can make it reach. Let's consider how Mary modeled the assistant's job:

(1) First and foremost, to willingly become someone's handmaid requires great trust in the person (or God) who is going to be the master. As Pope John Paul the Great wrote in his Encyclical Letter *Redemptoris Mater (Mother of the Redeemer)*, paragraph 13: "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' (Vatican Council II, *Lumen Gentium*, para. 56)."

(2) Mary left the consequences of her "yes" in God's hands. She did not make her "yes" conditional, as in "Okay, Archangel Gabe, but only if you explain to Joseph why I'm pregnant and he's not the father" or "Just make sure the townsfolk don't stone me to death or even criticize me for getting pregnant without Joseph."

(3) She made a complete commitment to align herself with God. He was free to do with her as he willed. She did not second guess him. Nor did she offer her own opinion about where the baby should be born or what should be done with the animals or what kind of visitors they should get. This is what it means to be an extension of God's hand. We are not the hand. We are not God.

(4) By choosing to say "yes" she opened herself to receive all the help she would ever need from God to fulfill her vocation. It was not Mary who convinced Joseph to go through with the marriage instead of divorcing her; it was God who sent Joseph an angel in a dream.

(5) Her consent came from true humility — the same kind of humility that her Son would have in consenting to the crucifixion. Such willingness lets go of all desire for self-comfort and personal gain. It is a total giving of self, an altruism that comes from knowing that God's goodness is far greater than our own best efforts.

(6) Being the Lord's assistant is a partnership with the Holy Spirit, who is the "handmaid" or servant of the other two members of the Blessed Trinity in carrying out all divine operations. The transformation of Mary's "yes" into an actual pregnancy required the servanthood of the Holy Spirit. Mary cooperated with the Holy Spirit "by her obedience, faith, hope and burning charity in the Savior's work of restoring supernatural life to souls" (*Lumen Gentium*, para. 62). A good handmaid is more than just an obedient servant; faith, hope and love provide the motivation in union with the Holy Spirit.

(7) Giving consent meant not only allowing God to do things to her, but also doing things for God. As his handmaid, she put herself into the position of being done unto. He did not order her around or abuse this position in any way, but he did put her into some very difficult situations. Certainly it was not easy traveling on a donkey to Bethlehem in the last month of pregnancy. Giving birth in a chilly, dirty stable without her mother's help was probably not the way she had imagined this special moment would be. And fleeing to Egypt instead of returning home with the baby was a very disappointing and challenging time. Yet, she let God do this to her because she had meant it when she said she'd be his handmaid. At the same time, she was doing it all for God out of tremendous love for him.

(8) Mary's "yes" united her to both the intentions and actions of God. His intentions became her intentions. His actions became her actions. The Father intended to redeem the world through his Son; Mary intended to redeem the world through her Son in accordance with his plan as it unfolded. The Father let his Son die for our sins; Mary let go of her Son as she watched him die, even though she did not yet fully understand the plan. God was in charge, and Mary united herself to whatever he did.

(9) A good handmaid listens closely to what the master wants. Mary had said, "Let it be done to me according to Your WORD." She was a good listener. "Through faith Mary continued to hear and to ponder that word, in which there became ever clearer, in a way 'which surpasses knowledge' (Eph. 3:19), the self-revelation of the living God. Thus in a sense Mary as Mother became the first 'disciple' of her Son" (*Redemptoris Mater*, para. 20).

(10) Since a handmaid of the Lord is a disciple of Christ, a handmaid is also a true follower. It's not hard to figure out what God wants of us because Jesus is leading us to do the same things that he did (see John 14:12). In *Redemptoris Mater*, paragraph 41, we read: "She who at the Annunciation called herself the 'handmaid of the Lord' remained throughout her earthly life faithful to what this name expresses. In this she confirmed that she was a true 'disciple' of Christ, who strongly emphasized that his mission was one of service: the Son of Man 'came not to be served but to serve, and to give his life as a ransom for many' (Matt. 20:28).

Today, as Queen of Heaven, Mary still continues to serve as God's handmaid. As Pope John Paul the Great added in paragraph 41, "The glory of serving does not cease to be her royal exaltation: assumed into heaven, she does not cease her saving service, which expresses her maternal mediation 'until the eternal fulfillment of all the elect' (*Lumen Gentium*, para. 62).

Like Mary's service, our ministries do not end when we leave the earth. We would do well to give our full "yes" now to our vocations as handmaids (for the guys: use the word "hand-servants"), because in one way or another, we'll be doing it in front of God's face when heaven is our home.

Let us rely on Mary's ministry of being God's handmaid whenever we need his helping hand to reach us. And let us allow her to teach us how to do the same for others.

How can you be God's hand touching the lives of those around you? Are you trying to control it and do things your way? Have you avoided doing a good deed that Jesus would have done, something he could do through you now? Listen to what he is asking you to do for him and say, "Lord, let it be done to me according to Your will; I am your handmaid (or hand-servant)."