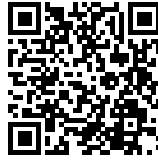




MARY: WE ARE HER PEOPLE

Posted on September 1, 2019 by Father Stephen Freeman



In my childhood, it was not unusual to hear someone ask, "Who are your people?" It was a semi-polite, Southernism designed to elicit essential information about a person's social background.

The assumption was that you, at best, could only be an example of your "people." It ignored the common individualism of the wider culture, preferring the more family or clan-centered existence of an older time.

It was possible to be "good people" who had fallen on hard times, just as it was possible to be "bad people" who were flourishing. Good people were always to be preferred.

I am aware of the darker elements of this Southern instinct so foreign to today's mainstream culture. I am also aware that within it, there is an inescapable part of reality: human beings never enter this world without baggage. The baggage is an inheritance, both cultural and biological that shapes the ground we walk on and the challenges we will inevitably confront.

Father Alexander Schmemmann is reported to have said that the spiritual life consists in "how we deal with what we've been dealt." In some families, it seems that no matter how many times the deck is shuffled, the same hand (or close to it) appears.

The Scriptures are rife with this element of our reality. It is a story of fathers and sons, mothers and daughters, tribal destiny and inherited blessings. Two of the gospels give a chapter to rehearse the genealogy of Christ.

Modern thought wants to imagine each human being entering the world as a blank slate whose life will be formed and shaped by their desires and choices. This is our imaginative version of freedom and we work to maximize its reality.

Nevertheless, human experience continues to be doggedly familial. Those who do family therapy carefully ask questions about the generations that have gone before. The battles of our lives are not about theory, but the cold hard truth of what has been given to us.

The Scriptures relate the stories of *families*, including their tragedies and horrific crimes. No Southern

novelist ever did more than echo the iconic behaviors of Biblical failure.

This familial treatment is intentional and tracks the truth of our existence. There is never a pain as deep as that inflicted by someone who is supposed to love you. Such injuries echo through the years and the generations.

The face that stares back at us in the mirror is easily a fractal of someone whose actions power our own insanity. We can hate a parent, only to be haunted by their constant presence in us.

This, of course, is only the negative, darker side of things. Blessings echo in us as well. In the delusion of modern individuality we blithely assume that we act alone in all we do. Life is so much more complicated!

What I am certain of, in the midst of all this, is that our struggle against sin and the besetting issues of our lives is never just about ourselves. If we inherit a burden within our life, so our salvation, our struggles with that burden, involve not only ourselves but those who have gone before as well as those who come after. We struggle as the "Whole Adam" (in the phrase of St. Silouan).

There is an Athonite saying: "A monk heals his family for seven generations." When I first heard this, my thought was, "In which direction?" The answer, I think, is *every* direction. We are *always* healing the family tree as we embrace the path of salvation, monk or layman. Our lives are just that connected.

When the Virgin Mary sings her hymn of praise to God, she says, "All generations will call me blessed." This expresses far more than the sentiment that she will be famous (how shallow).

It has echoes of God's word to Abraham, "In you, all the families of the earth shall be blessed" (Gen. 12:3). It is in the Offspring of Mary that the word to Abraham is fulfilled. In the Scriptures, God is pleased to be named the "God of Abraham."

That His name is tied to that of a human being brings no offense. Indeed, paradise itself is called the "bosom of Abraham." It is right and proper that Christians should see the same treatment in the Virgin, the one in whom all these things are fulfilled.

"All generations" is a term that includes *everyone* – not just those who would come after her. For the salvation of the human race, in all places and at all times, is found only in Jesus, the Offspring of Mary. She is "Theotokos," the "Birthgiver of God." Mary is exalted in the bosom of Abraham.

When I look in the mirror these days, I see the unmistakable reflection of my father. No doubt, his reflection is seen elsewhere in my life, both for good and ill. I'm aware that some of my struggles are with "my daddy's demons."

Of course, my vision is limited to just a few generations. I see my own struggles reflected in the lives of my children (for which I often want to apologize). I do not see the link that runs throughout all generations – throughout all the offspring of Adam – it is too large to grasp.

What I do see, however, is the singular moment, the linchpin of all generations that is the Mother of God. In her person we see all generations gathered together. Her "be it unto me according to your word" resounds in the heart of every believer, uniting them to her heart whose flesh unites us to God.

Across the world, the myriad generations of Christians have sung ever since:

*My soul doth magnify the Lord.
And my spirit hath rejoiced in God my Savior.
For he hath regarded the lowliness of his handmaiden.
For behold, from henceforth all generations shall call me blessed.*

To which we add:

*More honorable than cherubim,
And more glorious beyond compare than the seraphim,
Without corruption you gave birth to God the Word,
True Theotokos, we magnify you!*

We are *her* people. Glory to God!

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The [photo](#) shows, "The Blessed Virgin," by Giovanni Battista Salvi, called il Sassoferra, ca. 17th-century.

