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St. Scholastica's Priory  
Manila

Dear Sisters,

May is our transfer month—to be more exact, May 10. Some of us will be transferred and therefore we will have a change of venue, of work... of community. But even those of us who are not transferred will have a new community since there will be additions or subtractions of members in the community.

It is a good time to reflect on the blessings of COMMUNITY. We do not choose those with whom we will live. So this puts our community life already in the realm of FAITH. We are a community of faith! So it is in this spirit that we welcome the Sisters we will be living with.

I have said this in my conferences but I would like to repeat it here, that each of us, whether we like it or not, “emits” energy and this energy is either positive or negative but never neutral. I have likened a community to a group of people on a space ship, where oxygen is of vital importance. If a person’s energy is positive, he/she is giving the others more oxygen, but if one’s energy is negative one sucks from the others their precious oxygen. So it is similar in our religious community, if our aura of energy is positive then we will be energizing the other members of the community, but if our energy is negative, we are actually de-energizing them.

So how do we know whether our energy is positive or negative? One test would be to observe our habitual thoughts, feelings, attitudes. If these are generally or most of the time generous, compassionate, considerate, forgiving, understanding, contented, joyful, it is impossible that the energy we emit will be negative. But if these are generally and most of the time resentful, envious, angry, unforgiving, judgmental, distrustful, it is impossible that the energy we emit can be positive. So it is in our power either to be an asset or a liability to our community. May we all strive to cultivate positive thoughts, attitudes and emotions so that we can contribute to the health, well-being and joy in our new community. God bless!

Sincerely yours,



Sister Mary John Mananzan, OSB

# STATIO CONFERENCE

## BENIGNITY

By Sr. Mary Thomas Prado, OSB

### Introduction

This statio conference invites us to reflect on the fruit of the Holy Spirit called benignity. A quick vocabulary search in the internet reveals several definitions. First, it is the “quality of being kind and gentle”, a personal quality or disposition. Second, it also refers to “a kind act”, something done with graciousness, benevolence or thoughtful consideration. The synonyms are gentleness, goodness, graciousness, kindness and mildness. Wikipedia’s entry is a medical definition – coming from the Latin *bene* (“well”) and *ignis* (fire), it is a medical term used to describe a condition that is harmless. In whatever sense benignity is used, it is definitely something that is GOOD NEWS.

In this statio Sunday’s reflection I will be referring to benignity as kindness and gentleness.

### Benignity in the Bible

Biblical versions translate benignity either into kindness or gentleness. The New Revised Standard Version, The New International Version, The New Living Translation, English Standard Version, New American Standard Bible, International Standard Version and American Standard Version refer to benignity as KINDNESS. On the other hand, King James Bible, American King James Version and Webster’s Bible translation use the translation - GENTLENESS.

Two introductory notes offhand -- first, biblical commentators are of the agreement that the fruits of the Spirit “do not flow from our nature. The vices...are the proper “works” or result of the operations of the human heart; the virtues...are produced by a foreign influence – the agency of the Holy Spirit. Hence, Paul does not trace them to our own hearts, even when renewed. He says that they are to be regarded as the proper result of the Spirit’s operations on the soul” (Barnes’ Notes on the Bible). The grace from the Holy Spirit are called “fruits” because they are of the internal principle of grace and not “works” as the actions of human beings are (Gill’s Exposition of the Bible). Just like the other fruits of the Spirit, therefore, benignity is a GIFT, God’s beautiful handiwork in our human nature. St. Paul exhorts us to stay in the Spirit so that this gift will be ours.

Second, the Spirit's fruits of benignity, longsuffering and goodness relate to an expression towards others (Scofield Reference Notes; Peoples New Testament). Benignity is seen in relationships. I can have joy and peace as my internal state of being but kindness/ gentleness can only be kindness or gentleness if and when there is another human being with whom I can express it to and affirm it as such. Benignity is an internal grace that must be experienced by others.

Two commentaries on benignity as gentleness or kindness will help enlighten us in our reflection on this Spirit's gift.

"Gentleness is the same word which is translated "kindness" in 2 Corinthians 6:6. The word means goodness, kindness, benignity; and is opposed to a harsh, crabbed, crooked temper. It is a disposition to be pleased; it is mildness of temper, calmness of spirit, an unruffled disposition, and a disposition to treat all with urbanity and politeness. This is one of the effects of the Spirit's operations on the heart. Religion makes no one crabby, and morose, and sour. It sweetens the temper; corrects an irritable disposition; makes the heart kind; disposes us to make all around us as happy as possible. This is true of politeness; a kind of politeness which can far better be learned in the school of Christ than in that of Chesterfield; by the study of the New Testament than under the direction of the dancing-master" (Barnes Notes on the Bible).

In Matthew Henry's Whole Bible Commentary, he writes: "...gentleness, such sweetness of temper, and especially towards our inferiors, as disposes us to be affable and courteous, and easy to be entreated when any have wronged us..." Benignity, like any other Christian virtue, is practiced in situations more than the ordinary, an extra mile walk.

Let us look at the contexts in which kindness and gentleness are spoken of in the Bible:

- In reference to God's judgement  
Romans 2:4 - "Or do you despise the richness of his **kindness** and forbearance and patience? Do you not realize that God's kindness is meant to lead you to repentance?"
- In the context of our new life in Christ  
Colossians 3:12 - "As God's chosen ones, holy and beloved, clothe yourselves with compassion, **kindness**, humility, meekness and patience."
- In relation to the other fruits of the Spirit  
Galatians 5:22 - "By contrast, the fruit of the Spirit is love, joy, peace, patience, **kindness**, generosity, faithfulness, gentleness and self-control."

In Romans 2:4, God's kindness is not only a quality but a saving act such as the way God judges humankind. This kindness is referred to as goodness in 1Peter 2:3 "- if indeed you have tasted that the Lord is good." Both kindness and goodness lead people to repentance and to a new life. Benignity here is also closely related to mercy.

The mark of the followers of Christ in Colosians 3:12 is that their clothing, their skin so to say, is compassion, kindness, humility, meekness, patience. In contrast, in Romans 3:9-18, Paul speaks of the lack of kindness, righteousness and fear of God. Instead there is the presence of deception, bitterness, cursing and violence.

Benignity in the Bible then is associated with goodness, temperance, mercy, generosity, compassion and meekness. It is primarily an act of God and the primary quality of God in his relationship with his people -- "the Lord is kind and merciful."

### **Benignity in the Rule of St. Benedict**

In Chapter 64 on The Election of an Abbot, St. Benedict enumerates the qualities of the **abbot** which includes benignity in the sense of temperance, mercy, tenderness, gentle discipline of the weak, prudence, love, forethought, consideration and moderation.

He must be chaste, temperate and merciful. He should always let mercy triumph over judgment so that he too may win mercy. He must hate faults and love the brothers. When he must punish them, he should use prudence and avoid extremes; otherwise, by rubbing too hard to remove the rust, he may break the vessel. He is to distrust his own frailty and remember not to crush the bruised reed (vv. 9-13).

The contrasting attitudes to benignity are excitability, being anxious and extreme, and obstinacy. St. Benedict, however, qualifies this benignity that the abbot should show to his flock not to mean consenting to faults. Being a kind, tender and merciful abbot does not mean giving in to all the wishes and wants of his members. In v. 14, he continues:

By this we do not mean that he should allow faults to flourish, but rather, as we have already said, he should prune them away with prudence and love as he sees best for the individual.

If we look at the kindness of the abbot in this context, it can take the form of

**tough love** also. The abbot should correct and deliver the discipline but in the ordinary run of things he should be temperate and tender, much more so in situations when humanity is at its weakest and is bruised and about to break. In a place called rock bottom, one appreciates a hand stretched out in love and understanding to get one's self out of the pit and move on with life.

The monastery **cellarer** is also exhorted to practice benignity (Chapter 31) which also translates to temperance, maturity in conduct and wisdom. In this chapter, benignity takes the form of the acts of care and concern and of the **kind word**.

As cellarer of the monastery, there should be one from the community someone who is wise, mature in conduct, temperate ... not proud, excitable, offensive ... but God-fearing and like a father to the whole community. He should not annoy the brothers..If goods are not available to meet a request, he will offer a kind word in reply, for it is written: A kind word is better than the best gift" (vv.1-14).

The person who qualifies to be the **porter** of the monastery (Chapter 66) is someone who is able to provide a prompt answer "with the warmth of love" to a knock on the door, especially one that is coming from the poor, "with all gentleness that comes from the fear of God" (vv. 3-4). Kindness here is warm, gentle, hospitable and given readily and given to all, especially to the poor.

Benignity in the RB is similar to the biblical concept – it includes warm love, temperance, compassion, tenderness, mercy, hospitality. The motivation for benignity is fear of God and love. In the RB, benignity is active – either a kind act or a kind word.

## **Possibilities and Challenges**

In the Filipino culture, benignity means *kagandahang-loob; mapagbigay-loob; ang kalidad ng uri at magalang; or isang uri gawa*. Kindness is also translated as *kagandahang-loob* or *kabutihan-loob*. A kind person is called *mabait* and a gentle person – *malumanay*. *Loob* is the interiority of the person. Malignity, the opposite of benignity, is *masamang hangarin*.

*Kabaitan* covers a wide range of meanings: *uri pagkamasayahin, mapagbigay-loob, kabutihan, kagandahang-asal, kalambingan, kahinahunan, pag-ibig sa Diyos, pagkakawanggawa, pakikiramay, unawa, pagkamaalalahanin, alang-alang, katapatan, mabuting pakikitungo, init, pagkamagiliw, pagpaparaya, pasensya, mabuting gawa o serbisyo* (W3 Diksiyunaryo ingles wika).

*Mabait* comes from the word *bait*. Fr. Dionisio Miranda expounds on the notion of *bait* through three qualifications: intrinsic, critical and practical. First, *bait* is intrinsic goodness and only human beings are considered as *mabait*, so the term is exclusive to human persons. The idea of kindness or benevolence does not exhaust the richness of *bait*. The other equivalents are humaneness, human-heartedness, human graciousness – “*bait* is what appropriately defines the best in the human person.”

Second, *bait* is intuitively critical goodness. It is associated with positive desires, emotions and sentiments. It has a critical intuition for the good because its very nature is to tend towards the good. Finally, *bait* is practical goodness, it is the goodness of action that is found in concrete situations. It is prudence or the sensitivity for the sensible.

As truly critical, Miranda points to the apparent contradiction between the critical character of *bait* and the cultural identification of *bait* with gentleness:

“...even if *bait* is acknowledged as a value, it is also recognized that gentleness has its limits. *Bait* cannot go to excess; it must remain reasoned goodness and reasonable gentleness. On the other hand, it also seems that precisely because of its gentleness it is *bait* which most deeply reacts against acts and situations contrary to and offensive to gentleness” (Miranda, 1988).

Indeed, in the Filipino context, Miranda says that -

“*Bait* can sometimes be misinterpreted and abused. Filipinos are so gentle that mothers end up being *kunsintidora*; fathers so indulgent that boys learn their discipline elsewhere. People are willing to overlook a priest’s gambling, drinking and womanizing provided only that he is *mabait*. Coup plotters and other criminals have been pardoned and amnestied in the name of *awa*, the quintessence of *bait*.”

In our culture we also refer to a person who is quiet, gentle, peaceable as *mabait na bata* or *mabait na tao*. While the Western concept for kindness denotes action (or a pattern of actions considered as kind), generally, the “Filipino view of normal human nature, as evidenced in *bait*, is essentially an optimistic one” (Miranda, 1988). Benignity as *kagandahang-loob*, *kabutihang-loob*, *mapagbigay-loob* makes me think that for us Filipinos the *loob* (interiority) of the person is basically and ontologically good and kind. Stretching this to the religious realm, we believe that this *loob* is the habitat of the divine. Benignity coming from this interiority is the biblical fruit of the Spirit.

Indeed, there can be many motivations for the show of benignity or kindness and gentleness, not all attributable to the grace of the Spirit. I can be kind to you so you will be kind to me. I can be kind to our employees so I will be accepted and loved. I can be gentle because I am afraid of conflict.

Benignity can be selective and near-sighted: I can be kind and intend the good of people I like but not those of others who do not belong to my circle of favored ones. It is also not clear-sighted all the time: even the intentioned good and kind act can sometimes be read by others as malicious. Three years ago when I came to St. Scholastica's College – Manila and started greeting people who crossed my path which was my way of acknowledging their importance and presence, they thought I was doing this for the school's accreditation!

The challenge for us Christians, as St. Paul continually exhorts, is to stay grounded in the Holy Spirit so that benignity comes from within and is motivated by love. This "kind love", expressed in action towards our neighbours, leads people to see and taste the goodness of God. The tenderness, the kindness, the gentleness by which we treat our Sisters in community and the people we work with in our apostolates make us witness to a tender, kind and gentle God alive in our midst. If the Spirit is alive in us benignity will break forth from within and make us an alleluia people!

#### **References:**

The Jerome Biblical Commentary

Barnes Commentary on the Bible

Gill's Exposition of the Bible

Miranda, Dionisio. *Loob The Filipino Within*, Manila: Logos Publications, 1988.

#### **Reflection Questions:**

1. In what way are you challenged to show benignity to your community, to the people you work with and even to yourself?
2. In Jesus' life, what is an example of benignity that inspires you?
3. How can we be a community that is alive in the Spirit?

**(Editor's Note:** Since May is Mary's month, I am including here an excerpt on Mary from the article: *Women's Discipleship and Leadership in Jesus' Movement:* by **Pauline Chakkalakal, dsp**)

#### **Mary of Nazareth**

Expounding the topic from a *Catholic* perspective, it seems appropriate to begin with Mary of Nazareth as she plays an important role in shaping the Catholic Church's view on women's vocation and ministry. Popes down the centuries have kept the Virgin Mary on a pedestal. For instance, one can find several passages in John Paul II's Apostolic Letter on the dignity and vocation of women - *Mulieris Dignitatem* - in praise of Mary as 'Mother of God' (*Theotókos*), in

whom “*virginity and motherhood co-exist*” (Nos. 4, 17), and Mary as “the most complete expression of woman’s dignity and vocation” (No. 5).

The traditional portrait of Mary as a pious, docile maiden, symbol of passivity and humility, has become a powerful means of domesticating women. The ‘humble Virgin’ image serves to maintain the status quo of an all-male governed and defined church. Mary needs to be rescued from this “masculine perception of idealised femininity”<sup>25</sup> inflicted on women and men alike, which many have internalised. A feminist reading of Mary is crucial to discovering the assertive, intelligent, self-confident and strong woman in Mary. Our reflections shall be confined to Mary at the Annunciation and in the Magnificat.

#### • **Mary at the Annunciation (Lk 1:26-38)**

Annunciation stories are common features in the infancy narratives of Matthew and Luke (see Mt 1:20-21; Lk 1:11-20; 2:9-15). They follow a literary pattern that had its origins in the annunciation stories of the Old Testament: Ishmael (Gen 16: 7-12), Isaac (Gen 17: 1-21; 18:1-12), Samson (Judg 13: 2-21). The pattern is *always* the same. It is particularly evident in Luke’s presentation of the annunciation episode.<sup>26</sup> We have no intention of examining the Lukan text now. Our purpose is to cull from it relevant issues affecting the lives of women.

Mary is presented as a virgin “betrothed to a man whose name was Joseph” (v. 27). In common usage the Hebrew word *betûlâh* and the Greek word *parthenos* connote unmarried woman, without always emphasising her physical integrity; the word is often equivalent of the English “girl”.<sup>27</sup> The appearance of the word ‘virgin’ twice in the same verse indicates Mary’s virginal state before the conception of Jesus. As far as the New Testament is concerned, the virginity of Mary is “not about the virtue of Mary, but it is about the origins of Jesus.”<sup>28</sup> It is to ensure Jesus’ divine origin without any human intervention, the only exception being Mary’s unique role in God’s plan. In other words, the virginity of Mary is more a Christological matter than a Mariological concern.

What strikes us in Mary’s “Let it be done according to your word” (v. 38) is her total openness and availability to God. She has been caught up in God’s plan beyond the realm of human imagination and control, and commits herself to cooperate with God in the realisation of that plan. Hers was a free and responsible act of self-surrender, and not a passive, helpless submission. It was an adult response, a creative fidelity of a fully liberated human being. By this courageous act, she becomes a true disciple who listens to the word of God and acts upon it. Like an exemplary disciple, Mary contemplates the unfathomable ways of her son by treasuring “all these things in her heart” (Lk 2:51). Jesus himself acknowledges the quality of discipleship of his Mother and praises her obedient response to God’s Word, “Here are my mother, my sisters and brothers! For whoever does the will of my Father in heaven is my brother and sister and mother” (Mt 12:49-50).

The point to be emphasised here is the fact that God chose Mary, a *woman* to collaborate in God’s plan of salvation (Gal 4:4). It is an affirmation of the sacredness of woman’s body. The celibate male theologians’ and church leaders’ preoccupation in projecting Mary as “virgin” immaculately conceived, should not divest her of her *womanhood*. This is important for

understanding the dignity and vocation of woman against the background of a patriarchal Jewish society that looked down on woman. The contempt for woman is best summed up in the synagogue prayer in which a Jewish man thanked God that he was not born a woman.<sup>29</sup> As Teresa Okure observes, despite this cultural predicament of the woman, God chose that channel for the birth of Jesus because in the divine scheme only a woman could give birth and nurture life along with God.<sup>30</sup> Jesus is indeed Mary's "flesh and blood", "the son of Mary" (Mk 6:3). God has honoured womanhood in Mary and empowered her for liberative mission. The Magnificat is a powerful testimony to this counter-cultural action of God.

#### • **Mary in the Magnificat (Lk 1:46-55)**

Magnificat, found only in Luke's Gospel, is said to be one of the four canticles in the Lukan narrative: "the Magnificat (1:46-55), the Benedictus (1:67-79), the Gloria in Excelsis (2: 13-14), and the Nunc Dimittis (2:28-32)."<sup>31</sup> Concerning the composition of the canticles, biblical scholar R. E. Brown holds that the canticles were pre-Lukan and Jewish-Christian formulations, which Luke added to his already existing narrative.<sup>32</sup>

The Magnificat possesses the characteristics of Psalms of praise with three basic parts: the introductory praise of God, the body of the hymn suggesting reasons for praise and the concluding part recounting again the motive for praise along with a blessing and/or petition. One can notice a resemblance between Mary's song and the canticle of Hannah in 1 Samuel 2:1-10, where Hannah bursts into sentiments of praise and thanks for God's marvellous deeds in bringing about a reversal of order.

The Magnificat proclaims "the great reversal", which is a major theme in Luke.<sup>33</sup> The lowly are lifted up; the mighty are cast down; the hungry are filled; the rich are sent away empty (Lk 1:51-53). That is revolutionary: in Mary, God has envisaged a new world order, a "three-fold revolution. . . a cultural, political and economic."<sup>34</sup> An analytical reading of the six verbs used in verses 51-53 reveals that these are "habitual acts of God" in favour of the oppressed, calling us to collaborate with God.<sup>35</sup> Mary identifies herself with the poor and lowly - the *anawim* and declares her commitment to their liberation and well-being. R. E. Brown helps us perceive the radicality of Mary's choice:

For Luke, Mary's virginity was like the barrenness of the O.T. women: both constituted a human impossibility which only the might of God could overcome. In using "low estate" and "handmaid" (i.e., female slave) of Mary, Luke is associating her with all the memories of the Poor Ones evoked by those terms—Poor Ones whom God has helped by his might, whether they were women yearning for children, or Israel reduced by oppression to the status of a "handmaid" (1 Macc 2:11) or "low estate" (1 Sam 9:16).<sup>36</sup>

The Magnificat has been termed "a dangerous story",<sup>37</sup> that challenges us to resist and transform all political, social, economic, and religio-cultural systems, claiming absolute authority and control. Mary's song recounts the story of God's justice, mercy, holiness and mighty deeds on behalf of the *anawim*. In her vision of a new community, Mary sees God's action on behalf of

the poor and exploited. She challenges the patriarchal order and all oppressive forces. Through her song of liberation, Mary announces the coming of the Messianic age and the prophetic mission of Jesus (Lk 4:18-19). Mary is confident that Yahweh will stand by the poor and effect a radical change in the oppressive structures and systems. Yahweh will achieve the final liberation of all people, through the death and resurrection of her Son.

#### • Implications for Women and Mariology

Mary at the Annunciation and in the Magnificat repudiates traditional Mariology, that has been serving the interests of the dominant shapers of society and church. By interpreting her *fiat* (yes) as the unquestioning and passive acceptance of God's will, women have been motivated and even subjugated to assume an attitude of slavish docility and blind obedience to those in authority. In the words of T. Balasuriya, "this presentation of Mary as the obedient, docile, faithful virgin-mother has the impact of rendering Marian spirituality rather pietistic, somewhat passive and even individualistic."<sup>38</sup>

The type of Marian spirituality practised in the Catholic Church is a clear proof of Balasuriya's statement. Mary is honoured not as the daring woman of Nazareth, but rather in symbolic roles as the Lady of Lourdes, Fatima, Guadalupe, or Vellankanni in Tamil Nadu or Mount Mary in Mumbai. Raymond Brown maintains that "precisely because we do not know much about the historical character and individuality of Mary, she lends herself more freely than Jesus does to a symbolic trajectory. She has been adaptable in various times and places..."<sup>39</sup> As Regina Coll observes, every age draws from the popular symbols of that age while at the same time reinforcing those symbols.<sup>40</sup> Thus we notice a variety of titles for Mary, such as Handmaiden, Virgin, Mother, Queen of purity, humility and so on. They have been presented as models for women. These symbols, as they have been applied to Mary, do not guarantee the empowerment of women or other marginalised groups. On the contrary, they actually disempower them by making them passive and resigned to their fate.

The distorted portrayal of Mary and other biblical women has led Christian women in general to submit themselves to clerical domination in God's name. This is particularly true of women religious (Sisters) in the Catholic Church, who are "linked in a special way to the church" (Can.573/2). In spite of their dedicated involvement in the church's apostolic activities, as well as their vibrant leadership in several areas of mission, they are in a more vulnerable position than their sisters outside Religious Orders. Canon Law can be invoked in support of their domestication in the church, precisely because the Canons on religious life indicate that the teaching church controls the interpretation of vowed life (Can. 576, 578).

The task of a new Mariology, then, is to let the Virgin of the Annunciation and the radical woman of the Magnificat stand up. Let the entire church learn from Mary the true meaning of humility. Far from denying her self-worth on the pretext of humility, Mary asserts her greatness by acknowledging the mighty deeds of God in her life (Lk 1:48-49). She thus gives a new sense and purpose to the virtue of humility. It is not by denying or by burying our gifts and talents that we glorify God, but by consciously accepting them with grateful hearts and placing them at the service of humanity. This positive dimension of humility shines out in the life of Mary from the

Annunciation to the Pentecost. Here it would suffice to mention Mary's visit to Elizabeth (Lk1:39-56) and her intervention at the wedding at Cana in Galilee (Jn 2:1-11). Both instances unfold Mary's genuine concern, womanly sensitivity and spirit of service. She combines humility and assertiveness in herself.

Marian devotions should dismantle the patriarchal portrayal of Mary as a passive woman and 'other-worldly' queen beyond the reach of ordinary humans. Instead, they ought to allow women to emerge as free, faithful and committed like Mary (cf. *LG*, no. 66). The Catholic Church's glorification of Mary and imitation of her virtues must aim at building self-confidence and realistic optimism in people, and instilling in them a sense of 'prophetic protest' against all forms of dehumanising systems. This is the kind of Mariology and spirituality that will do justice not only to Mary but also to other Biblical women.