

An extraordinary capacity to believe

By Sister Christine Allen, RSM
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Anxiety. Danger. Fear. Sorrow. Lack of understanding. Each of these played a role in the life of Mary, the mother of Jesus.

As Pope John Paul II said recently: "Mary had a life like ours. She knew the daily difficulties and trials of human life. She lived in the darkness that faith involves."

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Often when people think of Mary today, some phrase or description regarding her will spring to mind: Mother of God, ever virgin, full of grace, Morning Star.

Even though each phrase holds deep meaning, we sometimes find that the very same words seem almost empty just because they are so familiar. How can we break through the shell which habits can produce? Perhaps one way would be to return to Scripture to discover in a fresh way what it meant for Mary to live as a woman of faith in her own time.

For Mary, as for everyone, the future was hidden. She, like the rest of us, had to struggle at times to keep her faith in God and to discover what her mission in life was, even when she didn't understand completely what was happening.

Imagine the anxiety Mary must have experienced throughout her pregnancy. Think how she felt as her body began to change in response to the growing infant within her.

First she waited in silence for understanding from her fiancé, Joseph. For months Mary waited, knowing all the while that her punishment for infidelity to her betrothed, according to Jewish law, could be stoning to death.

Worrying about the damage to her reputation and fearful for her life, Mary must have struggled courageously to hold onto faith.

Imagine her relief when Joseph, after receiving a message in a dream, decided not to abandon her, but to take her as his wife after all.

But even the companionship of a husband couldn't protect Mary from the difficult situations to come. Her faith was to be tested repeatedly. As the biblical stories indicate, her faith grew in the midst of real struggles, dread and danger.

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Many women today, especially while pregnant with their first child, worry about reaching the hospital in time for the birth. Think of the dread that must have seized Mary when Joseph had trouble finding a room in Bethlehem when she was about to go into labor.

Then, shortly after her baby was born, Mary was forced to flee, to take an arduous journey to Egypt with her husband. She learned firsthand what it was like to be a refugee.

Imagine the pain Mary must have experienced when she heard that Herod "had all the male children killed who were 2 years old or under" (Matthew 2:16). Compare that to the way one feels at hearing today of an innocent child's murder.

Mary's son was a child of promise. But the fulfillment of this promise was revealed to only a few: Elizabeth, the Magi, Simeon and Anna. Most of the time Mary had to hope in the future.

Mary must have feared for the life of her son when the 12-year-old was lost for three days and nights. Think of the shock felt now on reading in the newspaper that a child is missing.

When Jesus died on a cross, Mary experienced fully what Pope John Paul II calls "the sign of contradiction." She saw her son humiliated, tortured, killed — the son she thought destined "to rule over the house of Jacob forever." Yet Mary remained faithful, while many others ran away.

It is easy to forget that the women and men who knew Jesus during his life on earth didn't have the same perspective on him that we do today in light of the Resurrection and Pentecost. Mary, along with Peter, John and

the other disciples, lived her faith in the context of uncertainty and confusion. "They did not understand what he meant."

Yet it was precisely her capacity to believe in the midst of difficult situations that made Mary — and these others — so great. It is also this that makes them relevant to us today.

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