

# **Our Lady of Loreto in the Life and Mission of the Airport Chaplain and the Pastoral Agent**

**An Address given to the Pontifical Council for the Pastoral Care of Migrants and Itinerant People XIV World Seminar for Catholic Civil Aviation Chaplains**

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## **Introduction**

At the center of the shrine of Loreto is, of course, the holy house of Nazareth. And that house is described simply and yet profoundly with the Latin words: *hic Verbum caro factum est, here the Word was made flesh*. Nazareth is a central point of reference for the Blessed Virgin Mary in the unfolding drama of our salvation in Jesus Christ. It is also, as I hope to demonstrate, an inspirational and formational resource for the mission, ministry, and life of airport chaplains and pastoral agents.

Permit me to share with you some reflections about Mary in this holy house of Nazareth and how this holy place makes her pilgrimage of faith real and palpable for us today. With these reflections in mind, I will propose a way of considering our mission, ministry, and life in our airport chaplaincies.

## **Nazareth: Point of Departure and Point of Arrival**

Drawing on the Second Vatican Council's *Dogmatic Constitution on the Church, Lumen gentium*, Pope John Paul II in his encyclical *Redemptoris Mater* says: "...I wish to consider primarily that 'pilgrimage of faith' in which 'the Blessed Virgin advanced,' faithfully preserving her union with Christ. In this way the 'twofold bond' which united the Mother of God with Christ and with the Church takes on historical significance. Nor is it just a question of Virgin Mother's life-story, of her personal journey of faith and 'the better part' which is hers in the mystery of salvation; it is also a question of the whole People of God, of all those who take part in the same 'pilgrimage of faith.'" (*Redemptoris Mater*, 5; see also *Lumen gentium*, 58)

In Mary's journey, Nazareth is a place of departure. From Nazareth, Mary goes to Elizabeth her cousin. From Nazareth, Mary goes with Joseph to Bethlehem and even to Egypt. From Nazareth, Mary goes with Jesus and Joseph to Jerusalem. From Nazareth, Mary goes to follow her son in his public ministry. In her life story and in her journey of faith, the holy house of Nazareth is truly a point of departure. That same place is a point of arrival. She returns to Nazareth from Egypt. She returns to Nazareth from Jerusalem. Whether she departs or arrives, this holy place where the Word was made flesh becomes a center, a focal point of her journey and pilgrimage of faith.

Nazareth, we can correctly conclude, is a fixed place, but it also represents the dynamic dimension of Mary's vocation and life: her journey or pilgrimage of faith in the company of her son.

### **Nazareth: The Place of Attention and Prayer**

In the holy house of Nazareth, Mary is—in the words of Pope Paul VI in his apostolic exhortation *Marialis cultus*—the attentive virgin and the virgin at prayer (see *Marialis cultus*, 17-18). She is able to receive God's message spoken to her through the angel Gabriel, because she is attentive, available, ready to receive what God offers her. She is able to comprehend what this word of God is, because she has prayed, that is, has been in communication with the one who does great things for her.

Nazareth is a quiet place. Nazareth is a place of rest, that is, a place of Sabbath wherein one finds not simply relaxation but true rest in God. And so, Nazareth fosters recollection, the inward reflection that directs attention to the heart where God speaks and calls us. In Mary's journey of faith, the holy house is not only a physical place but a sacred space, made sacred by creating the atmosphere of attention and prayer in which God joins his beloved creature.

### **Nazareth: The Place of Encounter and Welcome**

Saint Luke writes: "In the sixth month the angel Gabriel was sent by God to a town in Galilee called Nazareth, to a virgin engaged to man whose name was Joseph, of the house of David." (Luke 1:26-27a) A heavenly visitor, a messenger of

the Most High God, is sent to the house of Nazareth. Mary receives that visitor, the angel of the Lord, and welcomes him. Mary experiences some fear and some hesitation rooted in not fully understanding the purpose or the greeting that opens this encounter. Still, she meets and welcomes the angel, listening attentively to the message that he brings to her.

In this holy house of Nazareth, a poor and simple house of poor people, there is nonetheless a richness of humanity manifested in Mary's willingness to encounter and welcome the one who has come to her. She who is full of grace graciously receives her angelic visitor.

### **Nazareth: A Place of Growth and Formation**

Saint Luke insists that we know more about this holy house of Nazareth. It is the place—we already know—where the Word is made flesh, *hic Verbum caro factum est*. It is also the place where the Incarnate Word, in his humanity, grows and experiences formation in that sacred humanity. After the presentation in the temple, Saint Luke says: "When they had finished everything required by the law of the Lord, they returned to Galilee, to their own town of Nazareth. The child grew and became strong, filled with wisdom and the favor of God was upon him." (Luke 2:39-40) After the finding of the boy Jesus in the temple, Saint Luke echoing his earlier words says: "Then he went down with them and came to Nazareth, and was obedient to them...And Jesus increased in wisdom and in years, and in divine and human favor." (Luke 2:51a, 52) For Jesus, this holy house of Nazareth represents the place in which his humanity unfolds and grows. Notice, too, that for Mary Nazareth continues to be a formative place. After all the events of Jerusalem, when she returns to Nazareth, St. Luke says: "His mother treasured all these things in her heart." (Luke 2:51b)

The years in Nazareth are called "the hidden life," but it would be a mistake to say that these years are not productive or fruitful. The contrary is true. The years in Nazareth enable a time of maturing, ripening, and unfolding which bears much fruit in the public ministry of Jesus and, ultimately, in the holy mysteries of his suffering, death, and resurrection.

### **Nazareth: A Place of Vision and Mission**

We can envision Jesus leaving his house in Nazareth on the Sabbath and walking to the synagogue. Perhaps his mother follows from a distance. In the synagogue he takes the scroll of the prophet Isaiah and reads: "...the Spirit of the Lord is upon me, because he has anointed me to bring good news to the poor. He has sent me to proclaim release to the captives and recovery of sight to the blind, to let the oppressed go free, to proclaim the year of the Lord's favor.' And he rolled up the scroll, gave it back to the attendant, and sat down. The eyes of all were fixed on him. Then he began to say to them, 'Today this scripture has been fulfilled in your hearing.'" (Luke 4:16-21)

Nazareth is a small and poor town, a very humble place. In this moment, however, Nazareth is the stage on which the grandest and most extraordinary vision for all humanity is presented. In citing the prophet Isaiah and identifying the fulfillment of the prophet's words, Jesus has proclaimed his mission. And it is nothing less than the healing redemption of humanity, the long awaited salvation that only God can bring to his people.

Nazareth is the place where God's redemptive vision is revealed. What the angel quietly announced to Mary in the holy house now becomes a public proclamation, indeed, a proclamation destined to reach the whole world and all humanity.

### **Nazareth: The Place of Struggle**

*Hic Verbum caro factum est.* The Word became flesh and dwelt among us. The Word came among us in the beauty of creation, in the harmony of those who love each other and obey God, but also in the sinful brokenness that has afflicted all humanity since the time of Adam and Eve. And Nazareth itself made holy by the Incarnation of the Word is also a place where the struggle with sin and evil is enacted.

After Jesus' words in the synagogue of Nazareth and after an initial admiration of his vision, the mood quickly changes. An evil shortsightedness overcomes the crowd. Saint Luke writes: "...all in the synagogue were filled with rage. They got up, drove him out of the town, and led him to the brow of the hill on which their town was built, so that they might hurl him off the cliff." (Luke 4:28-29) At the beginning of his public ministry which begins in Nazareth, there is an anticipation

of how his public ministry will end in Jerusalem—with rejection and a violent death.

Nazareth is not only a place of vision and dreams. It is also a place of struggle where forces of evil and human sinfulness meet the holy one of God who will ultimately vanquish them. Nazareth contains the holy house, but it is no romanticized venue. It holds the lights and shadows of the human condition.

### **Nazareth: The Place of the Poor and Vulnerable**

Nazareth is a simple village of poor people. And in this poor village in a humble house dwells a virgin, Mary, who embodies the poverty and vulnerability of the place. She is young. She is a girl. She is poor. She is without a man. At every turn, she emerges as poor and vulnerable. God, however, favors the poor who place all their trust in him. And God favors Mary, indeed, makes her full of grace. What transpires in Nazareth enables Mary to be our *porta caeli*, the gate or door that opens and enables for us entrance into heaven.

### **Nazareth: An Ordinary Place**

What may most distinguish Nazareth and the holy house of Nazareth is that there is nothing that distinguishes it. It is a most ordinary place. At least externally, it appears to be no different than a thousand other small towns then or now in our world. Still, embedded in this ordinary place is the extraordinary drama of salvation that unfolds, beginning with Mary's *Fiat*, developing in the presence of the Word made flesh dwelling among us, culminating in his great proclamation of mission, and nearly coming to catastrophe in an aggressive act of rejection on the part of the townsfolk. In this ordinary town, in this plain house, the most extraordinary things happen. The destiny of humanity is shaped here. It must be so, because we have come to know: *hic Verbum caro factum est*. That makes all the difference.

### **Our Lady of Loreto in the Mission, Ministry, and Life of Airport Chaplaincies**

We have been reflecting on the Blessed Virgin Mary's journey of faith and the central place that Nazareth and the holy house occupies in her sacred pilgrimage.

Now it is time to probe the implications of Our Lady of Loreto for the mission, ministry, and life of airport chaplains and pastoral agents.

We can, of course, assume the tender and loving care of Our Lady of Loreto in the course of the ministry we exercise and the people whom we serve—the travelers, the airline personnel, the airport staff, and those responsible for safety and security. Her ever-present and ever-ready maternal concern is a source of consolation and confidence for everyone. In light of our reflections on Nazareth and the holy house, however, there is more to the story.

If Nazareth and the holy house represent a point of departure and a point of arrival, then this must mean something for us and for those whom we serve in the daily airport rhythm of departures and arrivals. To one who is untrained or insensitive to spiritual realities, the airport seems to present just so much motion, a flurry of activity in the countless arrivals and departures. To those who know and have read the signs embedded in the airport and the experience of travel, it is not simply a matter of motion. There is movement, that is, motion with direction. Each traveler and each worker involved in departing and arriving, in coming and going, embodies a precious life journey, a movement that finds its ultimate orientation and direction from God and in God. It is the mission and ministry of airport chaplaincies to affirm and hold that reality: in the motion of arriving and departing, there is the deeper movement of life journeys into God. Our Lady of Loreto, Mary at the holy house of Nazareth, that point of departure and arrival, clearly makes us aware of this holy reality.

We know that the holy house of Nazareth is Mary's place *par excellence* of prayer and attention to God. Our chapels in airports share that sacred purpose. They are places of quiet and rest, where travelers and workers can—even if for a little while—make themselves attentive and available to God. This refuge of quiet and recollection, however, is not limited to the chapel. Even on a noisy concourse, when we stop and meet the weary traveler or worker, we can create in that moment—and perhaps just for a moment—the space of attention and prayer. What a grace and gift this is, to cut through the noise, the confusion, the nervous energy of an airport and provide either in a chapel or in a personal encounter the space to meet the Lord. Our Lady of Loreto shows us a way to do this.

We know that the holy house of Nazareth is a place of encounter and welcome. It is a poor house, but it is rich in its hospitality. We who serve in airport chaplaincies do so often as the “poor relations” in the airport community. We do not have the material resources of the airlines and the governmental agencies that manage the airports. Instead of grand spaces, instead of banks of computers, instead of luxurious lounges, we have—in our poverty—a simple thing to offer: we meet and welcome those who come to the airport to travel or to work. We acknowledge their dignity and value. We affirm the preciousness of their lives. And we say—sometimes implicitly and sometimes explicitly—that they are loved by God and precious in his eyes. Truly, in that holy house of Nazareth, Mary leads us beyond the semblance of our poor and limited resources to the richness of human encounters and welcoming “in the Lord.”

We have come to understand that the holy house of Nazareth is a place of growth and formation for the holy family, for Jesus, Mary, and Joseph. In a quiet and unassuming way, the deepest mysteries and the most extraordinary graces unfold and take hold of the lives of those who dwell in this holy place. Airport ministry creates an arena in which growth and formation in the Christian life can take place. Those who serve can foster a spirit of kindness, compassion, reconciliation, justice, and love among those who pass through the airport or those who work there. What seems to be a transitory moment, a blip on the screen of life, can become an opportunity to be formed, conformed, and transformed in the mystery of Jesus Christ present among us by the power of the Holy Spirit. The work of growth and formation is God’s work, no doubt, because all is grace. Still, God asks his ministers to collaborate and cooperate in the work of grace by holding before all people an invitation to new life, to growth and formation.

We have heard that Nazareth is a place of vision and mission. Here, the Word made flesh announces God’s purpose and design. In countless ways—in the celebration of the sacraments, in preaching, in prayer services, in counseling, in words of encouragement, in simple greetings along the way—those who serve in airport ministry remind those whom they serve of the holy purpose or mission of their lives. We affirm that God entrusts to us a mission and that our lives are constituted and directed, ultimately, by that purpose. It is an invaluable gift that we give to others: to let them know that their lives and work have a purpose that may have been beyond their reckoning or imagination. It is God’s purpose, and it

emerges clearly on the landscape of Nazareth, just as we strive to let it emerge in our chaplaincies.

We watch Jesus with the eyes of Mary. We watch him in Nazareth and, in the synagogue, we see the rejection and struggle that marks the beginning of his public ministry in his native place and accompanies him throughout his ministry and culminates on the cross. We watch Jesus with the realistic eyes of Mary who knows the cost of struggle as she sees her son grapple with the forces of sin and evil. We share her confidence in his ultimate victory. In Mary, we can retrieve the solid foundations of hope and confidence that undergird our mission and ministry in the airports. These allow us to stand firm and to encourage those whom we serve. With Mary and her son who accompanies us, we will not deny the presence of struggle nor will we allow ourselves to be overcome by the forces of evil and sin that still infect this world. When the shadows of terrorism and exploitation and human trafficking and unjust labor practices and pure greed threaten to take hold and dominate our situations, we stand firm. We resist in the measure that we can. And in any case, we remain confident, as Mary was confident in her son who by his dying destroyed our death and by his rising restored our life.

We know that Mary lives in a humble house in Nazareth, a poor village. She is poor, and so she is favored by God “who lifts up the poor.” In her vulnerability, she places all her trust in God. In our airport ministry, we learn from the poor virgin of Nazareth how to receive the poor and vulnerable. These are not limited to the materially poor, although they are to be counted. The poor and vulnerable are also those who pass through the airport and suffer from a want of love, of security, of confidence—in short, a lack of the felt presence of God who alone can satisfy and fulfill us. Just as for God, these poor and vulnerable claim our special attention, and with the help of the poor virgin of Nazareth we draw them to their lasting fulfillment and hope in Jesus Christ.

Nazareth is, we know, an ordinary place. And nothing special distinguishes the holy house of Nazareth, at least not exteriorly. We learn from Mary of Nazareth that the grace and power of God unfold in the very midst of our ordinary lives. And in the airport ministry we strive to remind everyone that what seems commonplace is blessed by the presence of God, that what seems ordinary and unremarkable is blessed by extraordinary possibility, that what could easily pass by our notice is deeply loved by God.

## Conclusion

*Hic Verbum caro factum est.* When we contemplate Our Lady of Loreto in the holy house of Nazareth, we find ourselves drawn to single and simple focus: God is with us, God accompanies us. When we take that thought and reassuring sentiment and let it inform our lives and ministries in the airports, a marvelous thing happens. Despite complexities, challenges, difficulties, perhaps a lack of resources, and other weighty and real impediments, we grow in confident hope. We know for sure the presence of Mary, the Mother God and our mother. Clearly, we see her in our daily ministry and service and in the faces of those whom we serve. We see that “she shines forth on earth, until the day of the Lord shall come, a sign of certain hope and comfort to the pilgrim people of God.” (LG, 68)