Profile in courage: Following the example of Mary, our Mother in faith



"Mary's confidence in God gave her the courage to do what she did, to be who she was. That's why she is our mother and model."

The word

And Mary said:

"My soul proclaims the greatness of the Lord and my spirit rejoices in God my Saviour; because he has looked upon the humiliation of his servant. Yes, and now onwards all generations will call be blessed, for the Almighty has done great things for me.

Holy is his name, and his faithful love extends age after age to those who fear him. He has used the power of his arm, he has routed the arrogant of heart. He has pulled down princes from their thrones and raised high the lowly. He has filled the starving with good things, send the rich away empty. He has come to the help of Israel his servant, mindful of his faithful love – according to the promise he made to our ancestors – of his mercy to Abraham and to his descendants for ever." Luke 1:45-56

The context

By mid-1966, Robert McNamara was becoming increasingly anxious about the war in Vietnam. As U.S. Secretary of Defence, McNamara was intimately involved in shaping the war. He knew what was happening on the ground in Vietnam; he knew that America's strategy was failing and that it was being sucked into a guerrilla-type war it couldn't win. He knew that sending more troops would result in more casualties. In a private briefing with reporters that summer, McNamara confided that "no amount of bombing can end the war."

But in public, he said nothing. He kept quiet even after he became convinced that the strategy embraced by President Johnson and his generals was flawed. McNamara's family and friends were puzzled. Knowing his true feelings, they couldn't understand why he wouldn't resign. Still, he remained in office for another 18 months.

For the rest of his life, McNamara was racked with guilt over his failure to challenge the White House consensus on the war. He felt that his unwillingness to confront Johnson and the generals had contributed to the tragedy of Vietnam. He was angry with himself for his lack of courage.

There is nothing unique about Robert McNamara's story. As foreign policy expert Janne Nolan explains, the failure to speak out has been "a source of strategic failure over and over again." Too often, decision-makers have been afraid to challenge colleagues with whom they disagree. They stay silent rather than cause upset. They choose to say nothing, even if it troubles their conscience.

Lack of courage doesn't just happen to politicians. It can happen to all of us.

It can happen to our practice of the faith. We know it's not easy to practise our faith in 2026. Society is more secular now. Fewer people go to church; fewer people believe in God.

This challenging environment can make it difficult for us to witness to our faith. Like Robert McNamara, we can be tempted to keep our heads down, to stay quiet. We can lack the courage of our convictions.

The challenge

To live out our baptismal calling today requires courage and strength of character.

Unlike Robert McNamara, Mary, the mother of Jesus, had courage in abundance. She didn't keep her head down. She responded wholeheartedly to what God asked of her. She said 'yes' even though she wasn't sure of its implications. She followed Jesus faithfully all the way to the foot of the cross.

Her Magnificat also shows her courage. Mary voiced her opposition to the way the world is organised. She stood squarely on the side of the lowly and oppressed. She spoke of knocking the mighty from their thrones. Imagine what she'd say about some of the world leaders of today. She wasn't afraid to speak up for what she believed.

Mary was no meek young woman who stayed silently, submissively, in the background. Rather, in the words of Pope Francis, she is a model of strength, courage and joyful hope. Her unconditional 'yes' to God, Pope Francis said, gives us the courage to say 'yes' to God's call today. Mary had a 'courageous confidence' in God's plan, a confidence we also must share.

That courageous confidence was tested many times throughout her life. To be told of God's plan for her, to hear Simeon's prediction that a sword would pierce her soul, to see the way her Son was putting his life at risk, and then to see him arrested and executed as a common criminal, must have been very difficult for her to deal with.

Still, despite everything, Mary trusted in God. She knew that God was with her at all times, and that God would always be with her.

Mary's confidence in God gave her the courage to do what she did, to be who she was. That's why she is our mother and model. That's why she is a wonderful profile in courage. She shows us what it means to fulfil our baptismal promises. She shows us what discipleship means, what it costs. Her example gives us the courage to witness to our faith, to stand up for it every day without fear.

The connection

Through baptism, we receive the gift of the Holy Spirit, who gives us the courage to witness to the Gospel every day.