

The return of Our Lady

Commemoration of Our Lady of Walsingham + September 2020 †

Church of the Ascension, Chicago

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In those days Mary set out and went with haste to a Judean town in the hill country, where she entered the house of Zechariah and greeted Elizabeth. When Elizabeth heard Mary's greeting, the child leaped in her womb. And Elizabeth was filled with the Holy Spirit and exclaimed with a loud cry, "Blessed are you among women, and blessed is the fruit of your womb. And why has this happened to me, that the mother of my Lord comes to me? For as soon as I heard the sound of your greeting, the child in my womb leaped for joy. And blessed is she who believed that there would be a fulfillment of what was spoken to her by the Lord." And Mary said, "My soul magnifies the Lord, and my spirit rejoices in God my Savior, for he has looked with favor on the lowliness of his servant. Surely, from now on all generations will call me blessed; for the Mighty One has done great things for me, and holy is his name." Luke 1:39-49

Our Lady, Mary, Mother of God, seems to lodge in some believers. Some of these believers are native to Marian devotion, grew up saying the rosary and lighting candles at her shrines. Others, like me, discovered her, or in some cases imagine that we were found by her, later in life. A line spoken by Elizabeth in the text from Luke that we just heard reminds me of a moment in my own life: "...why has this happened to me, that the mother of my Lord comes to me?" Those blessed with such a recognition, regardless of the individual timeframe or origins, share the joyful mystery of Mary's light, her faith and her presence.

This notion of the persistence of Mary in the faith of the Church and in the hearts of believers seems particularly apt with regard to Our Lady of Walsingham. An account of a visit to Walsingham in 1513 by the scholar Erasmus captures something of the complexity of Mary herself, in theology and history and lives of faith. Mary shimmers and is glorious one moment. In another moment, or even simultaneously, she may be arrestingly ordinary as she draws near to us. Erasmus wrote of the original shrine and image of Mary at Walsingham: "When you look in you would say it is the abode of saints, so brilliantly does it shine with gems, gold and silver ... Our Lady stands in the dark at the right side of the altar ... a little image, remarkable neither for its size, material or workmanship."¹

Some of you will know the history. The shrine that Erasmus visited had origins in a vision of Mary by a noblewoman in the 11th century. By the early 16th century, when Erasmus visited, Walsingham was one of the preeminent pilgrimage sites in Europe. And in 1538, 25 years after Erasmus' visit, the shrine was destroyed in conjunction with Henry VIII's suppression of the monasteries. The original image of Mary from Walsingham was first taken to Lambeth and then no one knows; likely it was burned on the streets of London along with so many other holy objects.

This iconoclasm and violence notwithstanding, our Lady persisted in Walsingham. According to one account: "The buildings were looted and largely destroyed, but the memory ... was less easy to eradicate." More than 25 years later, in 1564, "a woman ... declared that a miracle had been done by the statue after it had been carried away to London."² Authorities put the woman "in the stocks on market day to be abused by the village folk but" her persecutor concluded "The image of her [Mary, Our Lady of Walsingham] is not yet out of ... their heads."³

Fast-forward now, 350 years, as the restoration of the premises and devotion at Walsingham began with the Roman Catholic church, in 1898. A separate Anglican shrine at Walsingham was fully re-established by 1938 and now includes within it, as well, an

Orthodox chapel. Walsingham has once again become a favored pilgrimage and devotional destination among these diverse traditions.

One Third Order Franciscan who went on pilgrimage to Walsingham in 1987 returned with an image of Our Lady of Walsingham. On the evening of my ordination she approached me with a look of both sweetness and distress. The distress was owed to her wanting to keep the treasured holy image for herself. The sweetness resulted from her conviction that God had told her I was in greater need than her of Our Lady. That image continues in my care and devotion.

I haven't ever been to Walsingham, but she's on my bucket list, a pilgrimage there. Whether or not I make it in this life, I do know a few places in the map of my own heart and faith where Mary abides, and where she persists in times of comfort and joy and in times of trial. Even when my noblest devotions are overcome by destructive forces and I am unable to find or fathom her for a season, she persists and finds her way back.

Some of you may also know of those holy places where she may visit within you, and you may walk some inner pilgrim's path to get there. If she has been obscured for a season, I pray you will believe in faith that she will find her way back. Hold on both to that hope and the hope that you will welcome and recognize her when she returns. *Amen.*

[†]This commemoration reflects the date on the Roman calendar, as we at Ascension will not share a mass on more usual October 15 Anglican commemoration.

¹ Brief History of the Shrine of Our Lady of Walsingham, 1061-2011, Archdiocese of Southwark.

² Wikipedia entry for *Our Lady of Walsingham*.

³ Paraphrase from *A History of the County of Norfolk Vol. 2*, William Page VCH pp. 394-401.