



# Real Life with MARY

GROWING IN VIRTUE TO  
MAGNIFY THE LORD

Kelsey Gillespy

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1 2 3 4 5 6 7 8 9

29 28 27 26 25 24

# Contents

## Introduction

*There's Something about Mary* . . . . . 1

## Submission to God's Will

*The Annunciation* . . . . . 11

## Charity

*The Visitation* . . . . . 19

## Piety

*Blessed Are You* . . . . . 27

## Humility

*The Magnificat* . . . . . 35

## Fortitude

*Traveling to Bethlehem* . . . . . 43

## Adoration of Jesus

*The Nativity* . . . . . 53

## Contemplation

*She Kept All These Things in Her Heart* . . . . . 61

Faith	
<i>The Lord's Words Would Be Fulfilled</i> . . . . .	69
Responsibility	
<i>The Name the Angel Had Given</i> . . . . .	77
Generosity	
<i>The Presentation</i> . . . . .	85
Redemptive Suffering	
<i>Simeon's Prophecy</i> . . . . .	93
Courage	
<i>Fleeing to Egypt</i> . . . . .	101
Perseverance	
<i>The Return to Jerusalem to Look for Jesus</i> . . . . .	109
Patience	
<i>Finding Jesus in the Temple</i> . . . . .	117
Determined Cooperation with God	
<i>Wedding in Cana</i> . . . . .	125
Loyalty	
<i>Who Is My Mother?</i> . . . . .	135
Compassion	
<i>The Crucifixion</i> . . . . .	145
Prayerfulness	
<i>Devoted Themselves with One Accord to Prayer</i> . . . . .	155

Zeal	
<i>Sharing Jesus' Story</i> . . . . .	163
Epilogue	
<i>Thy Kingdom Come</i> . . . . .	171
Acknowledgments . . . . .	179

# INTRODUCTION

## *There's Something about Mary*

I met my husband on a long-distance blind date.

He was a cute, Catholic-raised boy with a life and steady job halfway across the country. I, on the other hand, was floundering about in my faith, finishing up my undergrad degree and moving forward toward a future that was *not* halfway across the country.

There he was, so solid in his Catholic faith, living it out in such a beautiful, magnetic way. And there I was, groping through life, thirsting to learn more about Jesus, but feeling forever parched. How was a woman in the twenty-first century supposed to live like Christ?

I understood how to pursue the world, no doubt. I knew how to set goals and achieve them. But doing that while living like Jesus? I had no idea how to do that. I didn't even know what "living like Jesus" meant. Was I supposed to walk around performing miracles? Forgiving people? Loving people? What did it even mean to love people like Jesus?

When the weekends came, my cute boyfriend and I spent every Saturday night together at Catholic Mass and every Sunday morning at random Protestant churches, shopping to find one that fit. We tried big Bible churches. Non-denominational churches. Old churches. New churches. None of them hit the spot. None of them answered the questions that burned so deeply within my heart: How can I live like Christ right here, right now? What does a God-loving, virtuous woman look like today?

The searching and shuttling back and forth to various churches all weekend, every weekend was not only disappointing, it was also flat-out exhausting. We were both feeling it. One night, as we hung out on the couch watching TV, that handsome, Christ-like boyfriend of mine nonchalantly turned and looked me square in the eyes. “When we’re married, I’d like us to be the same denomination.”

The words sucked all the air out of the room.

Was I supposed to focus on the marriage part of his sentence? Or the same denomination part? Up until that point, we hadn’t discussed either one. Surprisingly, I was cool with the marriage part. I knew I loved this boy more than anything else in the world. There was no doubt that I wanted to spend the rest of my life with him.

But the same denomination thing? I mean, this guy had been Catholic since birth, while I still bounced



around from church to church, struggling to understand Jesus. It was clear which one of us would be changing.

I was livid. Enraged. Hurt. Confused. After all, I was trying so hard to get my Christian legs beneath me, and now I was being asked to uproot and plant myself somewhere else? *And* get married? It was all too much.

Once I cooled off, I realized if I was truly seeking Christ, why *not* check into Catholicism? Shouldn't I exhaust every possible avenue until I found him?

And so I began. At first, I treaded lightly, cautiously tip-toeing each step of the way through Catholic doctrine. But the more I looked, the more I learned; the more I learned, the more I fell head-over-heels in love with Christ. My quest for Truth—my quest for Christ—had crash-landed me into his one, true Church. Slowly but surely, I stopped perceiving Jesus as some obscure being that was too distant to grasp and started to understand him as a real, physical Person. One I could literally hold in the palm of my hand.

I quickly realized I wasn't *changing* my faith. Nor was I being uprooted and planted somewhere else. Quite the opposite, in fact. Now, with the richness of Catholic teaching to guide me, my Christian roots dug deeper and stronger than ever before. And, as my sweet, Christ-like boyfriend predicted, I got confirmed in the Church one month before we got married.

Boy, did that open a whole can of worms. Now, I was Catholic. I was married. And, soon, I was pregnant. And I had no clue how to be any of those things.

Merely months before, I had been surging through life, slaying goals and pushing toward promising careers as a journalist and high school basketball coach—both of which had been front and center of the dream life I envisioned. Now I had to think about others? Put them *first*, even, and sacrifice myself?

This was nothing like what I had planned. Instead of conquering the world, I was now drowning in seas of confusion and desperation, cluelessly fumbling through my life as a Catholic woman, wife, and mother. Over time, one baby turned into two, then three, then four, and five. Finally—*finally*—I did something utterly Catholic. I took a closer look at Mary.

Up until that point, I'd thought Mary was a passive, goody-two-shoes type, flat and unrelatable. I mean, she was perfect and her kid was perfect. How hard could life be for someone like that? That kind of character didn't seem realistic, let alone intriguing, so I glossed over the verses in Scripture that mentioned her name.

*Yeah, yeah, Mary said yes to the angel Gabriel.*

*Yeah, yeah, she helped her cousin.*

*Yeah, yeah, she gave birth to Jesus.*

But when I started to *really* look at Scripture—to examine it, gnaw on it, and ponder it as Mary did—I found someone altogether different.

I found someone who said yes to Jesus before he even manifested himself in human form. Someone who was so in love with God, she would do anything for him, including tarnish her reputation and risk her life. Someone who, by her very nature of being filled with grace, must have had a difficult time fitting in with the crowd. Someone who understood the demands of motherhood and the pressure to lead her child in holiness. Someone who had been overcome with grief and sorrow. Someone whose purity did not make her immune to suffering, but rather intensified its pain.

In essence, I found all the answers to my desperate, burning questions. How can someone say yes to Jesus and live in a way that reflects him? What does it look like to be a holy woman? A holy wife? A holy mother? How can someone's life magnify Christ?

Mary.

She lived the answers.

Mary, then, not only proved to be relatable, but was so relatable that she was downright inspiring.

After all, I, too, have been falsely accused, grief-stricken, and lonely. I, too, have desperately desired to follow God and say yes to his will for my life. I, too, have longed to be a holy example to those around me.

And Mary did it all. Perfectly. But perfectly doesn't mean easily. No, the road Mary walked was a difficult one marked by many sorrows along the way, which only testifies to her spiritual toughness. She was tougher

than I could ever dream to be. I mean, I grew up living and breathing elite athletics. I was trained from a young age to be physically and mentally tough. But spiritual toughness? I didn't even know what that meant. So, one night, Mary taught me herself.

There I was, soaking up the still silence in our home at the end of the night. My husband was working late, and after I'd put the kids down for bed, all I wanted was to plop down on the couch and watch a show or movie. One I could choose. One that starred real people instead of cartoons. A new one, I decided, about Mary. But as I got everything ready for rest and relaxation—including my own heart—I thought of the hamper of clean, unfolded clothes in my bedroom. I had done load after load of laundry throughout the day and had folded them all, save that last one. I knew what Mary—a mother inclined to perfect humility and charity—would do. She would make the sacrifice to serve her family, and she would do it with joy. The hamper, a constant thorn in my side, continued to beckon me.

“But, Mary,” I whined, “the movie I was going to watch is about *you*. Isn't that good enough?”

“We must not simply watch it.” Her words were as jolting as a right hook, yet as gentle as a caress. “We must live it.”

In that moment, I understood. We cannot absorb virtue as passive witnesses. To be Christ-like, we must

work with God to build virtues within ourselves by putting them into action.

After all, could the greats—people like Leonardo da Vinci, William Shakespeare, Marie Curie, Michael Jordan, and Serena Williams—have risen to historical ranks in their fields if they had not dredged through countless hours of practice? Of course not. God gave them their passions and abilities, and they had to put their crafts to use in order to grow, develop, and perfect them.

The same is true with virtue. We don't merely absorb it through osmosis or gain it by passively observing others. No, developing virtue is a beautiful blend of God's grace merged with human effort. After all, God doesn't want to sit back and watch us go it alone. In fact, he knows we'd fail miserably if we tried to live virtuously all on our own. So instead, he helps us along this narrow path, generously pouring out his grace upon us through Baptism, and then giving us the spiritual gifts we need to continue the journey.

But we can't sit back and let God do all the work. Like a little child on a long journey, we must slip our hand into our Father's and walk with him. There may be times we feel exhausted or parched or lost. In those moments, we can cry out to God for what we need. Then, sustained by his grace, we can courageously set forth once again, putting God's gifts into action—pulling, tugging,

yanking them forth from our spirit even when it's hard. Even when it's tiring. Even when it's the last thing we want to do and everything in us just wants to give up.

And, if we look closely enough, Mary shows us how to do that very thing.

In this book, we'll dive into Scripture and the life of one not-quite-so-saintly Catholic woman (ahem, me) to pull out the richness that makes Mary the greatest heroine to ever live.

Together, we'll examine the way Mary lived out the virtues as a God-loving woman, wife, and mother. Sounds a bit intimidating, but really, it's pretty simple. We'll walk through all of that together, one step at a time. Here's what you'll find in every chapter:

- *Scripture Verses*: take a glance at God's word and hear what he says about his own Blessed Mother
- *Real Life Stories*: read stories from my crazy life that have taught me more about Mary
- *A Soul That Magnifies*: take a closer look at how Mary lived out the virtues and learn how she can help us to do the same
- *Ponder in Your Heart*: ponder God's word with reflection/discussion questions
- *Fiat*: practice virtues through challenges so you can magnify the Lord, too
- *Prayer*: bring it all back to God through prayer.

I will continue to pray for you as we take Mary's hand and trek toward Jesus together. And, as our souls grow in virtue, I hope and pray that you, like Mary, will truly magnify the Lord.