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"My whole life shouts the greatness of the Lord,
my living spirit breathes the joy of God my Savior.
Even in my smallness, the Blessed One has blest me.
From now on, all those who look back on this moment will see it:
The Mighty One has done for me a mighty deed:
Holy God's Name!

Mercy is for those who stand in awe of God,
generation to generation, an ever-widening circle.
Even as God shows the persistence and strength of a fighter:
Scattering the proud in the thoughts of their hearts,
toppling the powerful from their arrogant heights,
and lifting up the lowly.
God has filled the hungry with good things,
and sent the rich away empty.

A faithful people are supported,
in God's memory of mercy,
according to promises made to our ancestors,
and kept with their descendants forever."

This is my own translation of the Song of Mary, the Mother of Jesus, from the Gospel of Luke (1:46-55), based on the meaning of the Greek words, phrases and the plays-on-words which can sometimes get lost in a more formal translation. It is more of an interpretive translation than a grammatically accurate one, but it captures the deep well of joy and hope which enlivens Mary's song – her "Magnificat." Its words resonate with my deep hopes in 2018, and, I hope, yours as well.

Mary sings of her own improbable pregnancy and motherhood, even as she visits family. Elizabeth, her kin, much older and even more pregnant, with the one who will become John the Baptist, is also moved to praise God:

When Elizabeth heard Mary's greeting, the child leapt 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 leapt for joy. And blessed is she who believed that there would be a fulfilment of what was spoken to her by the Lord" (Luke 1:41-45).

What so moves these two women, old and young, to praise, in a very forgotten edge of the Roman Empire, an occupied land that seemed to be built on hopelessness and subjugation? One, Elizabeth, seemingly had more days behind her than in front. The other, Mary, a young woman betrothed, but with a pregnancy before her wedding which is shrouded in a divine mystery not yet known, makes her a possible subject of scorn by family and community. They remember God's actions in their history; God's never-failing presence to those who seem to be small and of no account – Abraham and Sarah, Moses and his wife Miriyam (which is Mary's name in Hebrew), Ruth, Hannah, the mother of the prophet Samuel, King David, the prophet Amos, the prophet Daniel, and many others. They remember how God moved powerfully with them and, even when some of them were unfaithful, God still made sure the 'promise of mercy' was kept. They knew that God remains faithful and divine promises are never broken, even though the promises of people and human leaders frequently are. The mercy-filled God is not someone who waits for what others might think of as 'perfect timing,' but acts out of the normal course of history, intervening in unexpected and world-altering ways that place the lowly ones at the center of God's attention and those who reject them on the outside looking in.

Mary's joyful outburst is a song of praise a merciful God who "shows strength of his arm" (i.e. fights) for the well-being of the poor of the land. This God breaks through the hopelessness which a persistent onslaught of evil can bring. Mary's song says that God's promise is that proud leaders will be brought low and God's kingdom will be populated by the lowly, the poor and the outcast. As we know, Jesus' preaching and life exemplified this, and his whole life was lived in solidarity with the poor. Mary's song – and Jesus' words and deeds – are cries of vindication, reminding us that evil is not the last word and God is still at work, acting on behalf of those whom society has broken down.

This divine action is not always easy to endure and it is frequently messy, painful and disruptive to all of us. We are witnessing it as those who attempt to mask evil deeds are exposed by God's revealing light, whether in places of national and global political power or at the heights of ecclesiastical arrogance. Even now God dethrones those who are selfish and corrupted by greed and power and he brings down priests, and even bishops, in our beloved Catholic community because of their carelessness and failures to keep children and vulnerable adults safe from abuse of power. Those who hold evil secrets have made our institutions – even the institution of the church - very sick.

God is a merciful healer, of course, but the healing of our church, our nation and world will not come without the spiritual medicine which empowers us to resist evils of racism, hatred, sexism, greed, corruption and disregard for people's dignity and lives, or without the spiritual surgery which seeks to remove the malice and lies which corrupt our vision, and lead us to harm the common pursuit of the truth and undermine the rights and dignity of others. The action of God working among those trying to bring healing and hope to the world – not through empty words about greatness and glory – but through actions for justice – often proceeds quietly and 'below the radar' – just as Christ's own coming at Christmas is recalled for its 'silent night.' The strength of persistence is not always obvious or noisy; it is often done person-to-person, quietly. At other times it is like the angel of the Lord appearing and saying, "it is time to move," as the angel did to Joseph to save Jesus and Mary from the wrath of a tyrant king who saw the newborn King as a threat.

In these days before Christmas we are reminded that, in the depths of our hearts, in the broken places of our lives, in the hurting parts of our communities and our world, God is coming, ready to be born anew in all of us and to come to the help of those who least expect it, in ways we cannot begin to anticipate. Mary's Magnificat reminds us that we have a lot for which to be hopeful. But it also reminds us that we should have our wits about us and be sure we are attentive to God's actions in our lives and our world. This is not the attention of staring into phones or social media, but listening, watching, carefully observing the needs of others, contemplating the plight of those who struggle, and all those who are looking for "the Mighty One to do a Mighty Deed" of healing, liberation and salvation. When we take the time to do that, we will be ready for Jesus to be born anew in our hearts, and we will know – like Mary and Elizabeth – where he can be found.

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On a personal note, 2018, while challenging, as it has been for many I know, has also been a busy year full of reasons for me to shout my own "Magnificat":

- As many of you know, it was with joy that I was able to announce the end of long-term search for full time work, when, in July, I began work at the United States Conference of Catholic Bishops! I serve as the [Assistant Director for Certification for Ecclesial Ministry and Service](#). This very long title, which I often struggle to condense, places me at a fulcrum of activity in the life of the Catholic Church. I work with dioceses and organizations, as well as colleagues in the bishops' conference staff, and the U.S. bishops' Subcommittee on Certification for Ecclesial Ministry, to resource all of these groups and others with information and best practices about ministry in the church, especially the increasing amount of pastoral leadership and ministry being done by the laity on a regular basis. In an era which continues to see a greater need for lay people to assume a place in the work of the church and to be well-formed and thoughtful disciples in the world, in this role I am in a unique position to both promote those endeavors and to work with others to refine existing standards for certification in ministry and to develop new aspects which can help guide present and future preparation for lay leaders in the church.

This unique opportunity has been a blessing in many ways, and I am delighted to work with many wonderful colleagues. It has also placed me in a position to have some truly unique encounters, including a week-long trip to Rome, Italy (my first time to Rome and to Europe!) which included a three-day gathering with colleagues in ministry from around the world to discuss best practices for promoting the formation of the laity in the life of the church. This special trip was made even more special by our group's participation in Pope Francis' weekly audience followed by a once-in-a-lifetime encounter with the Pope himself, captured in this photo (I am in the upper right):



For more information on my Rome trip, the learnings, and more photos, including the story behind this great photo, you can visit my website at <https://churchmd.com/rome>. For photos of the entire time, including my tours, visit <https://chcmd.me/romepotos>.

With opportunities such as that, my new position at the bishops' conference has been uplifting, and it affords me a wonderful opportunity to integrate my professional theological and ministerial backgrounds in a very creative and exciting way! At the same time, my time at the bishops' conference began as cover ups from actions or lack of action on the part of bishops in addressing the problems of clerical abuse of children and vulnerable adults once again fell over the life of the entire church. It has, frankly, been a devastating blow to see how procedures put in place over a decade ago continue to not be followed by certain bishops and priests, and the implications for cover up from those who may have known and did nothing to stop abuse is wrenching. As of this writing, we have not reached the end of these revelations, and our institutions have been too slow in responding to the cries of survivors and others who have been deeply hurt by this breach of trust and criminal negligence. Many have found this experience to have deeply shaken their faith in the Catholic Church – which is very understandable. I hope and pray people who have been crushed by these sins and crimes in the church will be able to hold fast to their faith in God, in Christ, in the Holy Spirit. The God who watches out for the those on the margins is with them. I am reminded from my theological training, and my experience as a lay minister, that the church is the whole people of God, and it is this People, inspired by God's Holy Spirit, in whom I trust the power of God will act decisively for the humble and lowly and who will bring down arrogant hearts.

Going forward, I see my work at the bishops' conference as an opportunity to work with my colleagues to make sure the voice and perspective of the laity is heard in institutional decision-making processes where this is possible, and that the perspective of lay ministry is always part of such conversations as well. One way I am doing so is through participating with others as a regular contributor to [videos reflecting on daily Mass readings](#) which appear on the USCCB website.

- In addition to this remarkable new opportunity, I continue to teach as a semester-to-semester adjunct professor in the Department of Theology & Religious Studies at **Marymount University** in Arlington, Va. I teach an introductory theology course to the undergraduates entitled "Theological Inquiry." The course serves as a basic introduction to theological method, a broad introduction to the Christian worldview, critical reading of the Bible, and the relationship of Christianity to Judaism and Islam. It is always interesting to help bend people's unexamined presuppositions on what the Christian faith is, what it says and how it is lived out!

On a related academic note, my paper on St. Oscar Romero, presented at the 2017 **Mid-Atlantic Region of the American Academy of Religion** was published in a collection of essays entitled *Religious Studies Scholars as Public Intellectuals*, marking my first in-book academic publication. You can read more about it at <https://churchmd.com/romero>. With Romero's canonization by Pope Francis this year, I am grateful for the timeliness of my essay, which reflects on his ministerial leadership combating 'post-truth' realities during his time as archbishop and the significance of his approach for those confronted with similar propaganda today. I also presented at the 2018 Mid-

Atlantic Region of AAR in New Brunswick, New Jersey and happy to attend with my long-time colleague and fellow WTU graduate Andrea Kramer. My presentation topic was on the 50th anniversary of a book published by one of the theologians discussed in my 2015 doctoral dissertation – Gregory Baum – and the relevance this book still had for today. It was nice to pull out the dissertation and use part of it for this presentation.

- My work with **Perisphere Media** has continued as well, though more limited with my full-time work and teaching activities. Nevertheless, I am glad to be part of this professional team providing digital media, communications and website strategy and support for a number of clients in D.C. and throughout the country, including several faith-based nonprofits.
- I participated in a number of conferences this year, too: February's **Mid-Atlantic Congress**, a ministry-training and networking activity for Catholics in the greater D.C. / Baltimore / NJ / Delaware / PA regions. I was able to reconnect with a number of friends and colleagues. In April, as part of my work with the Perisphere Media team, I helped lead digital communications again for the **Ecumenical Advocacy Days** conference here in D.C., addressing important issues of justice for migrants, immigrants and refugees through Congressional advocacy. Finally, I participated at the annual conference of the **College Theology Society** in late May, held this year at St. Catherine's University in St. Paul, Minn.
- My travels to my hometown of Utica continued, always to see and enjoy time with my mom and other family members, and for special events. I visited in January with my friend and colleague Matt Smith for the **AHL All Star Classic** hosted by the Utica Comets (Vancouver Canucks affiliate) at the Utica Memorial Auditorium. April brought me to Utica to participate in and help serve as a master of ceremonies for **Holy Week services at St. Mary of Mt. Carmel / Blessed Sacrament Church** – an always inspiring time and an important ministry connection for me in the midst of my other activities.
- In May, I took the opportunity to see the **Syracuse Chiefs** for the last time as the **Washington Nationals** Triple-A affiliate, before they were sold to the New York Mets. While at St. Catherine's University in St. Paul for CTS, I also visited **Target Field for a Minnesota Twins game**, my third visit to that ballpark. As usual, I enjoyed my share of **Washington Nationals** games this year, including D.C. hosting the **All Star Week and All Star Game in mid-July**.
- A sci-fi and science weekend in late May saw me take in *Solo: A Star Wars Story* at the Smithsonian Air & Space Museum IMAX theater and enjoy "**Escape Velocity**" – a STEM and sci-fi cultural event at the Gaylord Hotel in Maryland's National Harbor. This year's event included a prop display, a replica of the Millennium Falcon, and a 50th anniversary tribute to *2001: A Space Odyssey*. I also visited New York City in October for a special screening of a 25th **anniversary retrospective on the series Star Trek: Deep Space Nine**. Matt and I had a great time at the event surrounded by fans of the show at a theater in Times Square before decamping to a *Doctor Who* themed bar in Brooklyn, complete with TARDIS prop! We enjoyed the second episode of the current series with fans there.
- My family is well, and I was able to spend significant time with my mom, aunt, uncle, cousins' families and more in Utica on various trips. My usual time with family on the Jersey shore (this year at **Seaside Heights**) was cut short due to starting the USCCB the previous week, but I was able to enjoy some wonderful time there with family and friends, including fellow WTU alumna **Kathleen Ogle**. I always enjoy spending time with cousin **Debbe** and her husband **Tom** and their son **Dominic** (age 15) as well as my cousin **Bob**, his wife **Crystal** and **Alex** (age 18), **Ana Capri** (age 6) and goddaughter **Victoria Marie** (age 4). This year Alex graduated from high school and is now a freshman at Johnson & Wales University, playing Lax and majoring in computer network engineering – a great young man! I ask your prayers for an uncle of mine who is undergoing treatment for cancer and for the repose of a great aunt who died of cancer this year.
- I've been able to enjoy time out with friends throughout 2018, including special events marking the 20th anniversary of long-time friends **Andrea Kramer and Kenneth Wong**. I participated in the Easter Week inauguration of former professor and friend **Fr. Jim Greenfield, OSFS as the 4th president of DeSales University in Pennsylvania**. I also enjoyed Thanksgiving with them this year and am always amazed at their two wonderful children **Simon** (age 12) and my goddaughter **Monica** (age 10). They are always a joy and bring such diverse interests to our conversations! I am hoping to reconnect with friends in Texas and other places in 2019, so reach out and help me add you to the list!

I am grateful to receive all of your cards this time of year! If we haven't been in touch, do reach out! I would love to hear from you! And you can follow my activities on my website churchMD.com! Merry Christmas and blessed 2019!