Opinion

News



(Dreamstime/Toni Sánchez Poy)



by Mariam Williams

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When I saw Catholic News Service's headline, "Like Mary, be 'influencers' for God, pope urges at World Youth Day vigil," I was intrigued. To associate Mary with influencers — people on Instagram who have millions of followers and who receive free product and sometimes money from marketers in exchange for reviews, pics and mentions — seemed like a reach to me. But I was more curious to know whether he would highlight how young Mary was.

I found video of the vigil and was disappointed to see he didn't. I was disappointed because I think her age is important to a message to youth, perhaps most especially to youth who don't get to be children.

Francis referred to Mary several times as a "young woman." I don't have a problem with that exactly; "young lady" and "young woman" can be terms of endearment. Also, "young woman" is an accurate description of Mary for the time she lived in. Though she's often depicted as older in visual art, most scholars agree she would've been around 14 at the time of the Annunciation.

Today, for the most part, she'd be considered a child, a child who took on great responsibility and who, as the pope said, "became the most influential woman in history ... without wanting to or trying to."

Without wanting to or trying to. I had a similar thought several years ago, and Mary's position struck me as unfair. She was poor, a teenager and a girl, all together creating a social position lacking any privilege or authority. Knowing what we now know about the teenage brain — the underdeveloped prefrontal cortex, the emotional part of the brain affecting decision-making faster than the rational part can intervene — I have trouble believing her "Let it be so," or yes, to God was as carefully considered as the pope made it out to be at World Youth Day.

"Many young people, like Mary, take a risk and stake their future on a promise," he said. I do believe teens are risk-takers, but not usually because they've weighed the consequences of their choices. Some of them have to be brave, and the promises they face vary depending on their identities and location in the world.

What promise does a black girl in the U.S. stake her future on when she sees her peers strip searched, Stacey Abrams defeated, Kamala Harris already being

dragged, and black men defending other black men who see black girls as prey? When even her teachers don't see her as a child?

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What promise do immigrant youth from Central America stake their future on when they are separated from their parents in an ICE detention center? When a Dreamer is used as a bargaining chip in a government shutdown?

What promise does a white teenage boy stake his future on when his word is taken as truth over a Native American elder's? When he can wear a hat that's become as much a symbol of white supremacy as a Confederate flag and still be considered an innocent kid who was caught off-guard in a strange situation?

If an angel of the Lord were to appear and ask any of the teens I described to assist in being God's influencer, I think all of them would be frightened, and all would answer with the emotional center of their brains rather the rational area. But only one of them would have the promise of innocence, of the benefit of the doubt, of success (Supreme Court appointments, the presidency, etc.) despite past indiscretions. The rest would be much more like Mary.

And today, I'd rather see her get to be a child.

[Mariam Williams is a Kentucky writer living in Philadelphia. She holds a Master of Fine Arts degree in creative writing and certificate in public history from Rutgers University-Camden. She is a contributor to the anthology *Faithfully Feminist* and blogs at MariamWilliams.com. Follow her on Twitter @missmariamw.]

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