

Celebrating Women Witnesses

A Project to Rediscover Women Leaders in the Catholic Church

What we know historically about Mary the mother of Jesus is minuscule compared to all that has been written about her. Vatican II gently de-emphasized what many saw as “Mary-worship,” or even “Mariolatry.” Instead, the Council celebrated Mary’s role as a faithful disciple of her son Jesus, whose person and salvific presence in the body of believers is central to Christian life and mission [13]. Nevertheless the Church’s 2,000 year history of devotion to Mary has served Catholicism well. It has provided both women and men with a powerful female model of holiness. Official Catholic doctrine has never considered Mary to be divine, yet veneration of her by the faithful has unwittingly preserved images of the divine feminine even to the present day. A brief essay cannot cover this fascinating subject in depth. It will be enough if we begin to discover the Magnificat woman of Nazareth beneath the rich evocations of the divine feminine which Catholic devotion has celebrated for centuries.

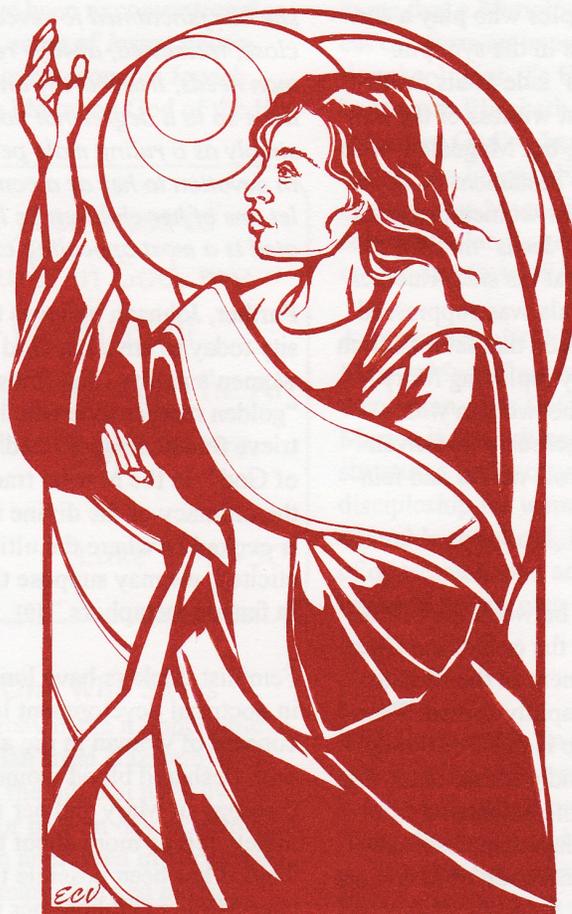
Mary in the Christian Scriptures

The scriptures themselves tell us very little about Mary as a historical figure. Paul refers to her only once, and then not by name in Galatians 4:4: “When the time had fully come, God sent forth his Son, born of a woman, born under the law.” References to Mary by name appear in the Gospels and the Acts of the Apostles. Matthew’s infancy narrative (Mt 1:1-17) makes Joseph the central figure, not Mary, and treats the virgin birth more ambivalently than Luke. Biblical scholars have made much of Matthew’s naming four unconventional women, Tamar

(Gen 38:6-30; 1 Chr 2:3-6), Rahab (Josh 2:1-24; 6:1-2, 15-25), Ruth (The Book of Ruth), and Bathsheba (2 Sam 11:1-18, 25-27; 12:1-25; 1 Kings 1:1, 11-40; 2:13-25; 1 Chr 3:5) in Jesus’ genealogy. Their inclusion sets the stage for his recognition that sinners and outsiders are also chosen for God’s saving work in history and for the unusual circumstances surrounding Jesus’ birth [17].

MARY OF NAZARETH

Sign of God’s Liberation



Eileen Cantlin Verbus

In the Lukan infancy narrative, Mary is the central figure and is portrayed as a model disciple. Her response in Luke 1:26-27 “Behold I am the handmaid of the Lord be it done in me according to your word” is the reply of one yielding to God’s action. Elizabeth’s cry of recognition: “Blessed is the fruit of your womb,” establishes both Mary’s blood tie to the messiah and her discipleship.

But discipleship is more important than blood relationships, as biblical scholar Donald Senior’s analysis of three Gospel passages attests. In Mk 3:21-35, Matthew 12:46-50, and Luke 8:19-21 Jesus firmly states: “Whoever does the will of God is my brother and sister and mother.” Unlike the infancy narratives which show Jesus’ identity revealed to Mary and Joseph from the beginning, these earlier and probably more historical references show Mary

and Jesus’ family as unbelievers who

at first thought him out of his mind (Mk 3:21).

Most biblical scholars agree that the infancy narratives of Matthew and Luke were compiled later than the body of the Gospels and have special narrative purposes of their own [17]. Thus Gospel accounts of Jesus’ ministry do not give much evidence that Mary was among Jesus’ disciples during his lifetime, though scholars agree that she was a believer and a member of the New Testament Church by the time Acts 1: 14 was written (ca. 70-80). [12]

By the time John's Gospel was written (ca. 90-100) many biblical scholars believe that the figure of Mary had become symbolic of the Church, present from Cana to the Crucifixion [15]. Unlike Christology (the Church's growing understanding of the Christ mystery) which has strong historical roots, Mariology was to become an ahistorical and largely symbolic reflection (some would say projection) of male theologians.

Safe Feminine Role Model

Since historical references to Mary in the scriptures are sparse how did she become so prominent in the Catholic imagination? In *Mary, the Feminine Face of the Church*, Rosemary Ruether compares the biblical Mary with Mary of Magdala and the other women disciples who play a central and sometimes unconventional role in the synoptic Gospels. These women remain at Jesus' side at his death and burial while the men flee. The first witness of the Resurrection was not Mary, Jesus' mother, but Magdalen, with the other women. There is much New Testament evidence about the role of Magdalen and the other women disciples yet church tradition has glorified Mary, Jesus' mother, as the faithful woman who stayed loyally at his side. Ruether believes that the role of Mary of Magdala was suppressed because she presented a model for women that later Church leaders wanted to ignore. She says, "By replacing Mary Magdalene with Mary, the mother as the 'woman who loved him,' the Church replaced a dangerously unconventional role model with a conventional role model and relationship." [16]

The Cult of Mary

Many scholars have found similarities between the cult of Mary that arose after Constantine, and the cult of the Great Mother Goddess (Isis, Artemis) prominent in the Mediterranean world into which Christianity rapidly spread. Theologian Jean Danielou showed that there is more dissimilarity than similarity between the Mary and goddess cults. But he acknowledges that Christianity adapted elements from the cults "wherein the female deities played an absolutely central role." [9]. Glorification and veneration of Mary met deep spiritual and psychological needs for a people whose hearts were accustomed to worshiping God under a feminine face. Scholars identify many concrete ways in which this adaptation happened. Lakes and springs where female deities were honored became associated with Mary. Shrines and temples to the Goddess were rededicated to Mary the Mother of God. Finally, as theologian Elizabeth Johnson notes it was "no accident that the doctrine of the Theotokos [Mother of God] was proclaimed in Ephesus, the city famed for its enthusiastic worship of the Greek Goddess Diana." [9]

Medieval Europe saw a growing emphasis on the doctrine of God's judgment. Christ was seen as the all-just judge and supreme ruler. It was also a high point in the history of Mariology. Psalms were rewritten substituting the name of Mary for God and feasts, relics, works of art and cathedrals dedicated to Mary multiplied dramatically. Her merciful intercession would surely plead a sinful people's case before her Son's stern throne of judgment. [9]

Icon of She Who Is

Elizabeth Johnson believes that one reason Mary has been so important throughout Church history is that:

Mary has been an icon of God. For innumerable believers she has functioned to reveal a divine love as merciful, close, interested, always ready to hear and respond to human needs, trustworthy and profoundly attractive, and has done so to a degree not possible when one thinks of God simply as a ruling male person or persons. Consequently, in devotion to her as a compassionate Mother who will not let one of her children be lost, what is actually being mediated is a most appealing experience of God. [9]

Further, Johnson believes that there is a theological necessity today to envision God in ways that are inclusive of women's reality. She finds in the Marian tradition a "golden mother lode which can be mined in order to retrieve female imagery and language about the holy mystery of God." In the Marian tradition she suggests "wherever the ultimacy of the divine in Scripture, doctrine, or liturgy is evoked or where the ultimacy of the believer's trust is elicited, we may suppose the reality of God is being named in female metaphors." [9]

Feminist thinkers have long said that unconscious sexism in doctrinal development led to an over-idealization of the concept of woman in the abstract at the expense of dealing with flesh and blood women. Ann Carr believes that "the theology of Mary and her image in the Church may ultimately tell us more about the Church than about Mary." [4] Thus it has been possible to glorify Mary as ever virgin/ever-Mother and hold her up as an impossible feminine model, while at the same time ignoring the oppression of real women.

Jewish Mother of Jesus

And what of the historical Mary of Nazareth? Is it possible to discover the "real Mary" beneath theological projections? Elizabeth Johnson says the following historical facts about Mary find agreement among biblical scholars: Mary was a first century Jewish woman who was the mother of Jesus. She did not follow Jesus as a disciple during his

ministry in Palestine nor understand his mission to any great extent (Mark 3: 21-35).

However, Luke (in Acts 1:14) tells us that she did come to share the faith of the early Christian community and became a believer, a fact agreed upon by an ecumenical task force of scripture scholars. [12] As Johnson says: "Mary was the Jewish mother of Jesus who misunderstood and then believed." [12] I would add three other probable facts to Johnson's list. The first is that Mary raised her son in Galilee where Jewish families were losing their ancestral lands because of exorbitant taxation by Rome and its minions (such as Herod Antipas) among the religious leadership. [7,8] The second is that the historical circumstances surrounding Jesus' birth may have been unconventional. [17] Third, it is likely that at least some of Jesus' understanding of God's power to save came from his Jewish mother who taught him about the liberating God of the Hebrew Scriptures.

My soul proclaims the greatness of God, and my Spirit exults in God, my Savior. From this day forward all generations will call me blessed. The Almighty has done great things for me. Holy is God's name.

(Luke 1: 46-50)

Magnificat Mother of the One Who Saves

While the lack of historical data may make it impossible to know much about Mary, the woman from Nazareth, it is not at all impossible to reflect on the biblical narrative in ways that constitute good news for present day women and men. For example, Mary has been addressed in contemporary litanies as 'marginalized woman,' 'unwed mother,' 'refugee woman with child,' 'mother of a political prisoner,' 'widowed mother,' 'mother of an executed criminal,' 'breaker of bondage,' 'seeker of sanctuary' and other similar titles. [14]

I think it no accident that Luke's infancy narrative places the Magnificat in the mouth of Mary. According to biblical scholar Raymond Brown the Magnificat was composed neither by Mary nor by Luke but originated among the Jewish Christian converts of Jerusalem who adapted the prayer of Hannah (1 Sam 2:1-11). These Jerusalem Christians were members of the *anawim* (poor ones). This name came

to refer to those who could not trust in their own strength but had to rely upon God (widows, orphans, the sick, etc). The opposites of the *anawim* were not only the rich, but also the proud and self-sufficient who believed they had no need of God. [1]

For Rosemary Ruether, Mary "becomes a theological agent in her own right" [16] because in proclaiming the Magnificat she becomes the embodiment of Israel and cooperates with God to bring about the redemption of the remnant (*anawim*). Catherina Halkes notes that in the liberation theology of Latin America, the Magnificat "has been used as a source of inspiration to give concrete form to the messianic reality and structural relationships." [6] She and Ruether agree that a Mariology interpreted in light of the Magnificat can form an important link between feminist and liberation theologies. To Halkes, Mary does not express joy to her cousin Elizabeth because she is pregnant, but rather: "glorifies God's liberating action precisely because she is herself the liberated Israel: those of low degree who are exalted. Her Magnificat is as it were, a prelude in radical subversive language to Luke's Sermon on the Plain and the opening address of Jesus in Luke 4." [6]

Another feminist thinker, Mary DeCock, believes that Mary's Magnificat reveals her speaking as a liberation theologian. For DeCock, feminist discipleship such as Mary's is one critical of unjust norms and patriarchal structures in the church as well as in society. True discipleship for women and men means exposing the Church's scriptural, institutional and theological modes of oppression, and acting to change unjust limitations imposed by our own religious heritage. [5]

Conclusion

Unjust structures, in the Church or in society, are not corrected without first confronting the religious thinking that believes the status quo is the design of God. Attempts to 'demythologize' and then 'remythologize' Mary can help present day believers take heart in their own struggles to follow the way of Jesus in proclaiming the realm of God. Perhaps the woman from Nazareth can proclaim the Magnificat ways of God precisely because she is lowly. Perhaps it is from this place that both men and women recognize best Whose power it is that "casts the mighty from their thrones and raises up the lowly." In Elizabeth Johnson's words, we now see Mary "as our 'sister' in faith who reveals to women their own real resources . . . [who] as a real woman with much to contend with . . . gave herself to her life and to her God, in her own time and place and way . . . She is one of the cloud of witnesses (Heb 11-12) whose story encourages our own faith." [11]

Mary of Nazareth References

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There are many feast days for Mary of Nazareth throughout the year. The Church celebrates her birthday on September 7 and the Annunciation on March 25. Please use the enclosed prayer service in your parish or small faith community on those days or at another appropriate time.

In 2001, **FutureChurch** developed the original **Celebrating Women Witnesses** projects in creative partnership with Call To Action. Since that time hundreds of educational and prayer programs have been held in schools and churches throughout the U.S., Canada, Europe, Latin America, Malaysia and Africa. Currently FutureChurch is solely responsible for administering this very popular project. A specially designed **Teacher's Edition** is also available from FutureChurch which includes lesson plans and special projects geared to junior and senior high school students.

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A Prayer Service for the Feast of the Annunciation

This prayer service does not need to be limited to the feast of the Annunciation, March 25, but can be used any time people gather to reflect on the witness of Mary of Nazareth.

Note to planners: The worship space can be arranged anyway you like, according to the needs and size of the group. In the front, or in the center if people are gathered in a circle, place a small (table sized) unadorned Christmas tree. Nearby place a lit candle. As people gather for the service give each participant a taper, ideally one with a wide ribbon around it. The presider or ritual leader may want to offer a few words of welcome before the candle lighting.

Candle lighting: *As quiet music (perhaps an instrumental version of "God of Day and God of Darkness") is played, the presider lights a taper from a central candle and then lights the candle of one of the participants. The flame is passed from person to person.*

Opening Song: "God of Day and God of Darkness" (Marty Haugan, 1985, G.I.A. Publications)

Presider: May the peace of Jesus Christ, our light that shines on in the darkness, be with you.

All: And also with you.

Presider: God of Day and God of Darkness, fill us with your light of hope and of peace and of love. Let these candles remind us of the Divine spark that has touched all creation and has made it holy. Let these flames remind us of the Spirit within us who calms us in our fear, who ignites our passion to serve, who guides us as we, like your servant Mary, say yes to your invitation to bring your light to birth in the world.

All: We welcome your light into our lives, O God. Help us to trust your words and your ways as we ponder them in our hearts. Amen.

All extinguish candles.

Psalm 25: 1-7

Presider divides the group into two sections, A and B. (Psalm translation is from the New American Bible, 1990 Oxford University Press)

Presider: I wait for you, O Lord; I lift up my soul to my God.

Side A: In you I trust; do not let me be disgraced; do not let my enemies gloat over me.

Side B: No one is disgraced who waits for you, but only those who lightly break faith.

Side A: Make known to me your ways, Lord; teach me your paths. Guide me in your truth and teach me,
for you are God my Savior.

Side B: For you I wait all the long day because of your goodness, Lord. Remember your compassion and love, O Lord, for they are of old.

All: Remember no more the sins of my youth; remember me only in the light of your love.

Presider: Compassionate and loving God, open our eyes and our ears to you as we joyfully await your Word.

All: Amen.

Reading: Luke 1: 26-38

Reader: A reading from the Gospel of like...(after) the Word of the Lord.

All: Thanks be to God

Reflection/Sermon: *A brief reflection on Mary (see accompanying brochure) would be appropriate. Introduce the Tree Decorating Ritual allowing time for people to share their answers to the questions below in small groups.*

Tree Decorating Ritual: *Wide, soft ribbons (6-8 inches long) and pens are distributed to the participants. Ribbons could even be tied to the candles used in the opening ritual, and would be removed at this point. Presider or ritual leader invites participants to reflect on two questions and to write their answers on either side of the ribbon:*

1. In what way is God inviting me to bring Christ into the world?
2. What is my response to God right now?

Participants tie their ribbon on a branch of the tree when they finish writing.

Magnificat: After all have placed their ribbon on the tree, a familiar version of the Magnificat could be sung by the group. Or the song could be presented as a reflection perhaps accompanied by a liturgical dance.

Presider: *(Invite participants to extend a hand toward the tree and toward each other as sign of blessing.)* Saving God, you entered into our humanity through the womb of the woman. You joined our flesh and entered our lives, and you continue to invite us to bring you to birth in the world. Bless us and these ribbons and the wisdom they hold, tied to bows that are evergreen. Let them remind us of your call to discipleship, and of our response to your gentle invitations.

All: Help us to listen for your call and to say yes to your invitation. Amen.

Closing Prayer:

Presider: We thank you God for the gift of Mary, the Mother of Jesus, the Mother of the Church and our sister in faith. Light our way as we leave this place, confident in your presence within us.

All: Amen.

Closing Song: *An upbeat recessional song, such as "I saw Yes, My Lord (Digo Si Señor)" or "We are Companions on the Journey," would be appropriate here.*

Prayer service prepared by Barbara Ballenger who has her master's degree in pastoral ministry, writes for diocesan and religious media and works as a performing arts minister for Beacon Street.

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