



# MARY OF NAZARETH

## Rediscovering Mary's Message for Today



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### IN THIS RESOURCE

#### General Educational Resources on Mary

Mary in the Early Church: Mary in the Middle Ages: Mary during the Renaissance and Reformation: Revolution and Romanticism: Mary in Politics, Devotion & Doctrine (17th -19th Centuries): Mary in the Twentieth Century *by Mary Christine Athans, BVM, Ph.D.*

Reclaiming Mary: A Task for Feminist Theology  
*by Mary Grey, Ph.D.*

Will the Real Mary Please Stand Up  
*by Elizabeth Johnson, CSJ, Ph.D.*

Mary of Nazareth: Sign of God's Liberation  
*by Christine Schenk, CSJ*

Mary the Prophet: The Wisdom of Older Women  
*by Penelope Duckworth*

#### Mary, Mother of God Educational Resources

Mary, Mother of God: The Oldest Celebration  
*by Judith Davis, Ph.D.*

Opening Heaven to the World: The Shrine Madonnas  
*by Judith Davis, Ph.D.*

Mary in the Age of Complementarity  
*by Deborah Rose-Milavec*

Holy Virgin, Mother of God: When Faced with Impossible Standards  
*by Deborah Rose-Milavec*

#### Prayer Resources

Prayer Service Celebrating Mary as Sister, Companion, Prophet  
Poetry by Lynn Hybels

#### Flash Drive

Sample Four Week Education Program  
Podcast with Elizabeth Johnson, CSJ, Ph.D.

## The Solemnity of Mary, The Mother of God



# Mary, Mother of God

## Using this Packet in Your Community Options for Education and Celebration

### Mary: From Jewish Maiden to Queen of the Universe

Using the Educational Resources written by Mary Christine Athans, BVM, Ph.D., develop a multi-week series, tracing the of thought on Mary through history. You may also use the included Sample Education Program to host a four-session series.

### Mary: In Her Own Place and Time

Invite a local church historian or expert in First Century Judaism to present on what Mary's life would have been like. Alternatively, play the podcast with Elizabeth Johnson, "Will the Real Mary Please Stand Up" for an audience. Consider offering the essay on the oldest securely datable image of Mary in the Annunciation as a starting place for your discussion. Offer the enclosed essays to attendees (permission is granted by FutureChurch).

### Prayer Service Honoring Mary as Sister, Companion, Prophet, Disciple and Leader

Use the prayer service included in this resource to celebrate the Solemnity of Mary, the Mother of God to focus, not only on her motherhood, but on her symbolism as sister, companion, prophet, disciple and leader within the communion of saints.

### Mary in the Age of Complementarity

Using the essay by Deborah Rose-Milavec to explore the history and the use of Mary's symbolism to reinforce patriarchal values and structures through the "equal but separate" framework of complementarity. Explore the history of the idea, how it functions in today's church and what might be more useful model for women and men who look toward a church where full and equal partnership is the norm. Invite participants to use this essay to begin a discussion of the role of Mary in each person's life. Read and discuss the poem "Dangerous Woman" by Lynn Hybels. How does this poem change your understanding of Mary and by extension women in the church.

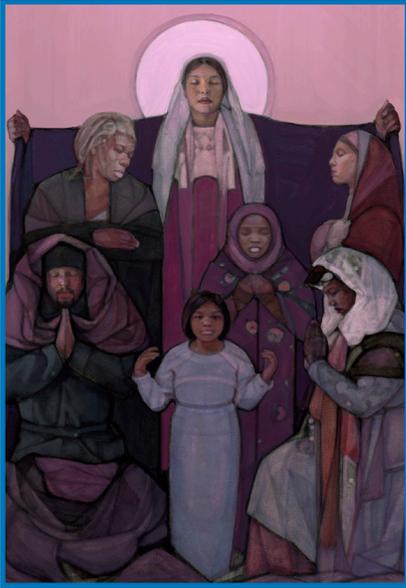
### Small Faith Sharing Groups

Gather a group of people together to read and discuss the enclosed resources. Consider using the following questions for discussion: *what in the reading surprised me? what in the reading challenged my view of Mary? what in the reading supported my view of Mary? what impact will this reading have on my spiritual life/life of faith?*

*This list of options is not meant to be exhaustive. Nor are the options mutually exclusive. They may be used in conjunction with one another. For example, you may wish to combine an education program and celebration or prayer service in one morning or evening. If FutureChurch can be of any assistance to you as you make your plans please let us know by email or phone. We would love to hear what you're doing! Feel free to share your celebrations and pictures with us.*

MARY OF NAZARETH

# Mary, Mother of God



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Mary of Nazareth Series Resource

## The Celebration of Mary, Mother of God

The Church's Oldest (and most disputed) Feast by Judith M. Davis, Ph.D.

The Council of Ephesus took place about 400 years after Jesus' death. During that time, the status of the Christian church had changed dramatically from that of a marginalized sect to the official state religion of the Roman Empire. The status of Christ's mother changed as well, due in some measure to a second-century account of her life, the *Protevangelium of James*. Written to refute the accusation that Jesus was conceived illegitimately, this work—never admitted into the scriptural canon—emphasizes Mary's purity and virginity at the time of Jesus' birth. It influenced the thinking of patristic writers who began to interpret Mary in a way that the gospel writers never did. No longer a poor Jewish woman from Nazareth who saw her questionably conceived son brutally executed by her country's occupiers, Mary became a sinless and virginal foil in the battle to defend Jesus as the son of God: "In the history of devotion to the Virgin Mary, this anxiety to deny the tradition of the illegitimacy of Jesus and defend the 'purity' of Mary fades into and feeds a desire to promote her importance and power."<sup>1</sup>

Well before the Council of Ephesus in 431, theologians had begun the process of exalting Jesus' mother, and devotion to Mary had begun in both East and West. Origen (d. 215) was one of the first to call Mary the mother of God. For Athanasius (d.373), "The reality of Christ's divinity and the reality of his humanity make Mary 'the Mother of God'; even as early as the first half of the fourth century, Christol-

ogy and Mariology went together."<sup>2</sup> One of the earliest Marian prayers dates from the third or fourth century—the *Sub tuum praesidium* or "Under your patronage." It reads: "We fly to your patronage, O holy Mother of God! Despise not our petitions in our necessities, but deliver us from all dangers, O ever glorious and blessed Virgin."<sup>3</sup> The idea of Mary as a patron—the best of all patron saints—recalls the Roman custom of patronage, in which a powerful person supported and protected someone of lower social status; in return, the client enhanced the reputation of the patron through praise.

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Fascinating and little-known evidence of fourth-century veneration of Mary can be found in a reference to a group called the Kollyridians by their critic, the eastern churchman Epiphanius (d.403). In the 370s, Epiphanius describes a group who, he claims, permit women to serve as priests in honoring Mary: "These women prepare a certain carriage with a square seat and spread out fine linens on a certain day of the year, and they put forth bread and offer it in the name of Mary, and they all partake of the bread."<sup>4</sup> In his commentary on this passage, Stephen Shoemaker says that "Epiphanius smears



his opponents with the charge that in so doing they have replaced God with Mary . . . . He further insinuates that their practices amount to pagan goddess worship. . . .” However, after quoting Epiphanius, Shoemaker suggests “that these rather precocious Christians were simply somewhat ahead of the curve in honouring Mary . . . .”<sup>5</sup>

As early as the fourth century, also, the Church in Jerusalem celebrated a feast called “The Memory of Mary,” also known as “The Memory of the Theotokos,” the God-bearer, emphasizing Mary’s “divine maternity and her virginity, often . . . close . . . to the feast of the Nativity.” That tradition influenced the future bishop of Constantinople, Proclus, who gave a now-famous homily on the Theotokos in 428, explaining the “theological and exegetical principles which defined the rhetoric and rationale for the cult of the Virgin Mary . . .”<sup>6</sup> This homily challenged the views of his contemporary Nestorius who had attacked Marian piety on the basis that Mary had given birth to Christ’s humanity, but not to his divinity. Nestorius responded angrily to the challenge, and the controversy—mainly Christological, debating whether Christ was both truly God and truly human— attracted political as well as religious attention.

Both church and state participated in the debate about Mary’s status. On one side of the church stood Cyril of Alexandria, supported by the empress Pulcheria, sister of emperor Theodosius II. His opponent Nestorius was favored by Eudoxia, the emperor’s wife.<sup>7</sup> “Cyril, bishop of Alexandria, believed ardently that Mary should officially be named Theotokos (God-bearer). Nestorius, the patriarch of Constantinople, was preaching that Mary was [only] Christotokos (Christ-bearer). . . . The emperor Theodosius II finally issued a call for a council . . . . The location was auspicious because of the belief that the apostle John had taken Mary to live

with him in Ephesus where she may have died.”<sup>8</sup> (Ephesus was also a former cult center of Artemis or Diana, worshipped as a virginal fertility goddess. Acts 21:23-31 describes how St. Paul encountered an angry Ephesian crowd who resented his opposition to the silver images of Diana’s shrine that were sold there; later, in 401, the goddess’ temple was destroyed by a Christian mob.)

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The highly contentious Council ended with the excommunication of Nestorius, much to the elation of the crowds which had been thronging the streets of Ephesus and shouting, “Praise be the Theotokos! Long live [archbishop] Cyril!” Hilda Graef observes, “It sounds like a Christian echo of the ‘Great is the Diana of the Ephesians!’ which had been shouted in the streets of this same city”<sup>9</sup> in Paul’s time. The actual title of Theotokos, Mother of God, was conferred on Mary some 20 years later, at the Council of Chalcedon in 451, which “defined the relationship of the divine and the human in Jesus known as the hypostatic union.”<sup>10</sup>

The aftermath of the two church councils produced a virtual explosion of devotion to Mary. Empress Pulcheria founded three churches in honor of Mary, all in or near Constantinople. The monastery of Panagia Hodegetria (“the all-holy one who shows the way”) is supposed to have had the portrait of Mary painted by St. Luke. The church at the Chalkoprateia was endowed with the “holy girdle [sash] of the Theotokos.” Pulcheria’s third foundation, the Church of Holy Mary of Blachernai, was located near a spring or fountain dedicated to Mary, and was said to possess the garment Mary wore at the Annunciation.<sup>11</sup> In Rome, Santa Maria

Maggiore was dedicated to Our Lady by Pope Sixtus (432-440). In Jerusalem, a church was built honoring Mary's tomb. In France, the temple of Isis at Soissons and the shrine of Diana at Chartres were converted to Marian churches. By the seventh century, January 1 was observed as a celebration of the maternity of Mary. Over the centuries the date and even the focus of the feast changed, from the octave of Christmas to the feast of the circumcision of Jesus, and it was not until 1974 that Pope Paul VI replaced the feast of the circumcision with the feast of the solemnity of Mary, mother of God.<sup>12</sup>

The conflation of motherhood and virginity in Mary was advanced by some of the earliest church writers, including Clement of Alexandria (d. 215) and Hippolytus (d.235). Clement may even have been the first to identify Mary and the Church as "one Virgin Mother."<sup>13</sup> Nearly two thousand years later, the concept of Mary as mother of God and mother of the church was proclaimed at Vatican II: "For in the mystery of the church, which is itself rightly called mother and virgin, the Blessed Virgin stands out in eminent and singular fashion as exemplar both of

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### The conflation of motherhood and virginity in Mary was advanced by some of the earliest church writers, including Clement and Hippolytus.

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virgin and mother."<sup>14</sup>

What does the feast of Mary, Mother of God, have to say to us today? What about the conflation of virginity and motherhood that can cause so much cognitive dissonance? We might ponder, like Mary, both canonical and extracanonical statements. Two ideas from the readings for the feast speak to me.

The first is chapter 4 of Paul's letter to the Galatians, where he compares the state of

humanity before Christ to that of an underage child, subject to guardians; but "in the fullness of time," God's son was "born of a woman" so that all of us could be called God's own freely adopted children, fully adult and heirs to all that God has promised. Mary's agency is paramount in this transition from spiritual impoverishment to divinely endowed wealth: God's generosity is expressed in the Word who joined us through Mary in an act of supreme solidarity with created beings.

The second is Mary's response to the events surrounding Christ's birth as recounted by Luke 2:5-19. After the shepherds and the angels have left, Mary keeps "in mind all these things, pondering them in her heart." As she was during the life-changing visit from Gabriel, she is now: not doubting, and not wondering much about the extraordinary manifestations all around her, just thinking things over in the depths of her being and taking care of the Life that has been entrusted to her. This marks the beginning of her faithful discipleship which, despite setbacks and challenges, never seems to have wavered, even at the foot of the cross and beyond.

In her singleness and singularity and integrity, Mary is virginal; in her bearing the son of God and her oversight of the early Christian community, she is motherly.

Indeed, St. Maximus the Confessor (d. 662) gives us a fresh perspective on Mary's role in the nascent church. Present at Pentecost, she was, he notes, "from the very beginning. . . full of the Holy Spirit and clothed with the power from above." Before Pentecost, ". . . the holy Theotokos was always a participant and a leader in every good thing. . . [S]he instructed the holy apostles in fasting and prayer," and after Christ's ascension she "sent forth the other disciples to preach to those far and near. . . And the eyes of all hoped in her, and they saw living





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among humanity in the place of the bodily Lord Jesus Christ his . . . most blessed mother who gave birth to him according to the flesh. She was a comfort to them and an inspiration in struggles and labors and every act of charity. But she was not only an inspiration and a teacher of endurance and ministry to the apostles and the other believers, she was also a co-minister

with the disciples of the Lord. She helped with the preaching . . .”<sup>15</sup>

Mary, mother of Jesus, mother of God, continues to be a comfort and an inspiration to all of us, encouraging us to be bearers of her son to the world. As Meister Eckhart puts it, “We are all called to be mothers of God. God is always needing to be born.”

## Sources/Resources

- <sup>1</sup>Jane Schaberg, “The Infancy of Mary of Nazareth,” in Elizabeth Schüssler Fiorenza, ed., *Searching the Scriptures: A Feminist Commentary*, (New York: Crossroad, 1994), 708-728, here 709. Schaberg states, “The telling of [Mary’s] story both influenced and was influenced by Christian asceticism, whose roots lie in Palestinian and diaspora Judaism and in Greco-Roman religious movements. A major influence on her story, however, was polemical” (708).
- <sup>2</sup>Hilda Graef, *Mary: A History of Doctrine and Devotion*, with Thomas A. Thompsom, S.M. (Notre Dame, IN: Ave Maria Press, 2009, 41).
- <sup>3</sup>Henri de Villiers gives the date of ca. 250 (not always agreed upon) in “Sub Tuum Praesidium,” [www.newliturgicalmovement.org/2011/01/subtuumpresidium.html](http://www.newliturgicalmovement.org/2011/01/subtuumpresidium.html). Retrieved 2/1/13. More information on early Marian doctrine and devotion can be found in *The Origins of the Cult of the Virgin Mary*, ed. Chris Maunder (London and New York: Burns & Oates, 2008).
- <sup>4</sup>Cited in Stephen Shoemaker, “The Cult of the Virgin in the Fourth Century: A Fresh Look at Some Old and New Sources,” in Maunder, 77. Shoemaker cites passages from Epiphanius’ *Panarion*. Ally Kateuz discusses the Kollyridians extensively in her essay, “Collyridian Déjà Vu: The Trajectory of Redaction of the Markers of Mary’s Liturgical Leadership,” *Journal of Feminist Studies in Religion* 29.2 (2013), 75-92.
- <sup>5</sup>Shoemaker, 77.
- <sup>6</sup>Shoemaker, 74.
- <sup>7</sup>For an account of the sometimes unedifying power struggle between the two women, see the article on St. Pulcheria in *The Catholic Encyclopedia*, online at [www.newadvent.org/cathen/12561c.htm](http://www.newadvent.org/cathen/12561c.htm). Retrieved 10/20/16. Sally Cunningham discusses the controversial council: *In Search of Mary, the Woman and the Symbol* (New York: Ballantine Books, 1996), 130-134.
- <sup>8</sup>Mary Christine Athans, *In Quest of the Jewish Mary: The Mother of Jesus in History, Theology and Spirituality* (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 2013), 25.
- <sup>9</sup>Graef, 86.
- <sup>10</sup>Athans, 27.
- <sup>11</sup>See Bissera V. Pentcheva, *Icons and Power: The Mother of God in Byzantium* (University Park, PA: The Pennsylvania State University Press, 2006), 120-21; Maximus the Confessor, *The Life of the Virgin*, trans. and intro. Stephen J. Shoemaker (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2012), 148.
- <sup>12</sup>[www.holyfamily.org/the-solemnity-of-mary-mother-of-god-january-1/](http://www.holyfamily.org/the-solemnity-of-mary-mother-of-god-january-1/) Retrieved 10/20/16.
- <sup>13</sup>Luigi Gambero, *Mary and the Fathers of the Church: The Blessed Virgin Mary in Patristic Thought*, trans. Thomas Buffer (San Francisco: Ignatius Press, 1999), 71-91.
- <sup>14</sup>Vatican Council II: *Constitutions, Decrees, Declarations, A Completely Revised Edition in Inclusive Language*, ed. Austin Flannery, O.P. (Northport, NY and Dublin: Costello Publishing/Dominican Publications, 1995), 86, paraphrasing Ambrose (d. 397), cited in Gambero, 198.
- <sup>15</sup>*Life of the Virgin*, 123-24.
- <sup>16</sup>Cited by Deborah Arca, [www.patheos.com/blogs/faithforward/2013/birthing-god-women’s-experiences-of-the-divine](http://www.patheos.com/blogs/faithforward/2013/birthing-god-women’s-experiences-of-the-divine). Retrieved 11/1/16.

MARY OF NAZARETH

# Mary, Mother of God



The Shrine Madonna, 1390 C.E.  
Eastern-Prussia  
Germanisches Museum Nurnberg

## Opening Heaven to the World

The Shrine-Madonnas of the Middle Ages<sup>1</sup> by Judith M. Davis, Ph.D.

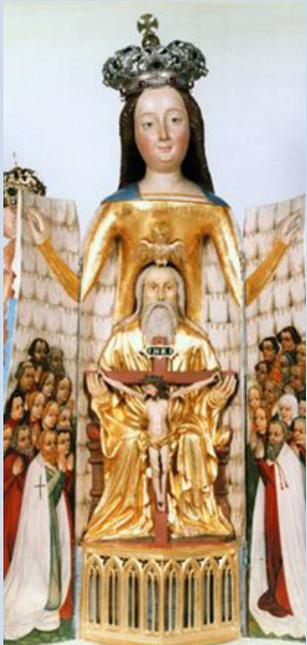
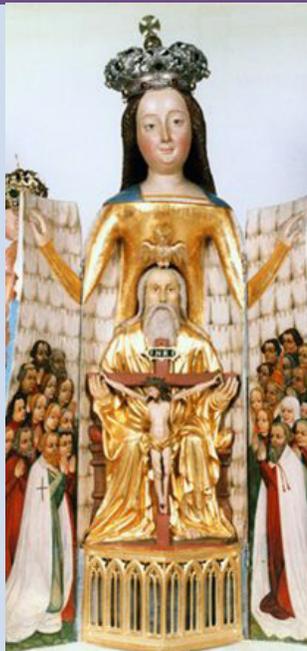
Perhaps the most daring and suggestive images of Mary as the Mother of God appear in a series of medieval sculptures called *vierge ouvrantes* or “opening Virgins” in French, *virgenes abrideras* in Spanish, and *schreinmadonnas* in German. Fashioned of wood, for the most part, lavishly decorated and gilded inside and out, these images date from the thirteenth through the sixteenth centuries. Like other statues, some depict Mary sitting on a throne, dressed in flowing robes and holding the child Jesus: these represent her as the *sedes sapientiae* or Seat of Wisdom. Other shrine-madonnas show her standing with Jesus on one arm. One image shows her pregnant, perhaps as the patroness of mothers-to-be; she is seated on a throne that could, perhaps, double as a birthing stool.

In all of these images, there is a cut in the wood from Our Lady’s neck to her feet that allows her body to open into a triptych, revealing, in its center, either a figure of Jesus or—more often—the entire Trinity in her womb, where the Father holds a crucifix with the body of Jesus and the Holy Spirit appears as a dove above his head. On either side of the Trinity are two wings or panels on which are painted—or, in some larger statues, carved—scenes from the lives of Christ and Mary, including Christ’s passion and death and Mary’s death and assumption; angels and saints; and congregations of the faithful. Gatherings of people, clerical and lay, painted on the inside of the image under Mary’s arm echo larger sculptures

and pictures that show her as the *mater misericordiae*, embracing humanity under her mantle of mercy.

Shrine-madonnas seem to have responded to a late medieval “commonplace to call Mary the bride or chamber of the Trinity so as to celebrate the fullness of the Godhead dwelling in her soul. As a fifteenth-century Frenchwoman prayed, ‘it was for sinners that the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit wished to lodge themselves in you. For this reason, sweet lady, it befits you to be the advocate of poor sinners, and for this you are the chamber of the whole Trinity.’”<sup>2</sup>

One magnificent shrine-madonna, carved in the Rhineland about 1300<sup>3</sup> and displayed in New York’s Metropolitan Museum of Art, will serve as an example of the genre. On the exterior, a queenly Mary nurses Jesus, who holds the dove of the Holy Spirit. Both figures are clothed in gold. When the figure is opened, along the slit from the madonna’s throat to her feet, we find the Trinity centered inside, also covered with gold. God the Father holds a gilded crucifix with a smaller cross at its center representing Christ. On the upper left panel, Gabriel visits Mary; opposite, on the right panel, Elizabeth embraces her. Below these two we see the birth of Christ on the left, with Joseph keeping watch at Mary’s feet and the ox and the ass above Jesus in the manger; on the opposite side, Mary presents Jesus to Simeon on an altar table. At the bottom of the left panel the Magi present their gifts, while on the right



the shepherds cower under the splendor of the skies.

Shrine-madonnas “were commissioned by members of the clergy, nobility, and monastic orders. By the fifteenth century, examples could be found in rural shrines, confraternity chapels, parish churches, and domestic settings, as well as castles, convents and cathedrals. . . . [They] could be adapted to suit existing devotional practices, both private and communal.”<sup>4</sup> Their appeal lay in a presentation of the salvation story in a visually compelling form that recalled ancient Marian metaphors figuring Mary as the Ark of the Covenant and Gate of Heaven. Shrine-madonnas literally embodied the concepts of Mary as Mother of God, Mother of Mercy, and Temple of the Trinity. And they seem to have been very popular. “By 1500 Shrine Madonnas

could be found in churches and convents from Portugal to Poland, and as far north as England and Sweden. French kings owned priceless golden Vierges inlaid with jewels, with interior carvings of ivory. . . . Some were later converted to eucharistic tabernacles, with the actual Body of Christ in the Host substituted for his representation on the cross.”<sup>5</sup>

There are only about 40 shrine-madonnas

### Eventually Pope Benedict XIV banned the images in 1745.

nas left in the world; most of them have been lost, stolen or destroyed. Four have disappeared in the 20th century alone, and even during the period of their popularity, they were subject to attack and mutilation. A Finnish church, for example, features medieval murals that “juxtapose Genesis episodes with the life of Mary, while her miracles appear on the vaults. . . . The church preserves a fragment of a large Shrine Madonna, carved in the fifteenth century, which was later gutted and glued shut.”<sup>6</sup> Others were damaged, their figures disfigured or cut out or effaced, perhaps because they were considered scandalous: they contradicted the image of the perpetually virginal Mary, described metaphorically as the “garden sealed” or “fountain enclosed” of the Song of Songs. A shrine-madonna, however, opens a stupendously fruitful Mary to the world, a mother and disciple bearing God’s messages of mercy, grace, and redemption.

As types or manifestations of “The Marian Trinity,”<sup>7</sup> these images also proved to be disturbing to clerics such as Jean Gerson (d.1429), Chancellor of the University of Paris, who delivered a sermon in 1402 condemning the imagery of the opening virgin, saying that there was neither beauty nor devotion in the sight of the opened statue, which could



Shrine Madonna  
[historiasztuki.com.pl](http://historiasztuki.com.pl)

lead to error because it looked as if the entire Trinity had taken on human flesh in the Virgin.<sup>8</sup> His cause was taken up by other clerics, and although the Council of Trent did not explicitly outlaw shrine-madonnas, eventually Pope Benedict XIV banned the images in 1745.

What do the shrine-madonnas have to say to us? The most important statement they make, I think, is that they show the female body as the locus of Godhead for the first time in the history of the church. Since the days of Tertullian (d. 240) women's bodies have been disdained as "the devil's gateway" and their minds dismissed as filled with trivia—if anything. "Every one of the major Christian



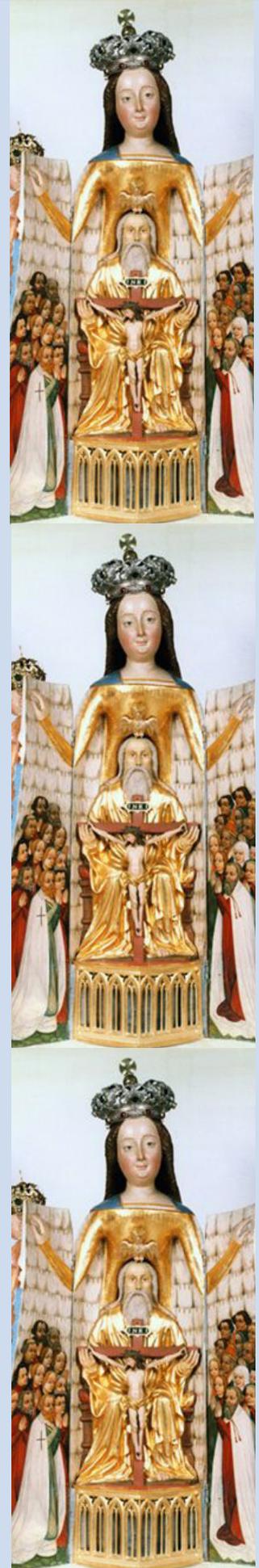
Shrine Madonna, 1420/30  
Dommuseum Wien

writers from the first century through the sixth assumed the mental and moral frailty of women . . . and reviled the body and sexual desire. This attitude was to pervade the medieval Church and persists into religious writings even today.”<sup>9</sup> (Lest this statement sound hyperbolic and outdated, I take as evidence of its accuracy an article published within the last year by a prominent Catholic weekly. The article dealt with temptation, and the illustration? A voluptuous blonde in a strapless red gown: sin personified.) Women's bodies have not been seen as godly but rather as sources of temptation, "occasions of sin" for men and for themselves. And on the other hand, in a miraculous kind of double bind, women's bodies have been considered the sole, soul-shrinking determinant of women's work—and worth—in the world as mothers and perpetual helpers.

**Shrine-madonnas shatter notions of shamed bodies and limiting wombs.**



Shrine Madonna, Musee Rolin





Shrine Madonna



Shrine Madonna, ca. 1300  
Made in Rhine valley  
Oak, linen covering, polychromy, gilding, gesso  
Metropolitan Museum

Shrine-madonnas shatter notions of shamed bodies and limiting wombs. In Mary's body, in the golden light of the

Trinity, we see the truths of faith illumined: the story of salvation, Christ's story, Mary's story, our story. We are aware of angels and the company of saints. We join the masses standing under Mary's cloak as she shields us from evil, aware that her partnership with God has transformed the world. Shrine-madonnas speak to celestial power, to the ability of the female body to embody God: as Mary carries the body of Jesus within her, she carries the love of the God who in emptying Self fills her and us with the divine Spirit.

A woman's body as the resting-place of Godhead. A woman's womb saying, "This is my body. This is my blood."

We need every shrine-madonna we can find to remind us of those dangerous truths.

## Sources/Resources

<sup>1</sup>Principal sources for this reflection include Elina Gertsman, *Worlds Within: Opening the Medieval Shrine Madonna* (University Park, PA: The Pennsylvania State University Press, 2015); Irene González Hernando, "Shrine Madonna," entry for the "Base de datos digital de iconografía medieval" project, completed for the Universidad Complutense Madrid, <http://www.pendientedemigracion.ucm.es/centros/cont/descargos/documento19275.pdf>, accessed 10/14/16; and Melissa R. Katz, "Marian Motion: Opening the Body of the Vierge Ouvrante," in *Meaning in Motion: The Semantics of Movement in Medieval Art*, ed. Nino Zchomelidse and Giovanni Freni (Princeton: Department of Art and Archaeology, Princeton University, and Princeton University Press, 2011, 63-87..

<sup>2</sup>Barbara Newman, *God and the Goddesses: Vision, Poetry and Belief in the Middle Ages* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2003), 272.

<sup>3</sup>Gertsman, 70.

<sup>4</sup>Katz, 66.

<sup>5</sup>Newman, 269.

<sup>6</sup>Gertsman, 118.

<sup>7</sup>Newman, 254-73, traces the depiction of Mary in the company of the Trinity in late medieval art, both two- and three-dimensional.

<sup>8</sup>Cited in French in Newman, 399. My paraphrase. See Newman, 283-290, for Gerson's development of devotion to St. Joseph as a counterweight to the Trinitarian Mary. She quotes Dyan Elliott as saying that "there is little question that the cult of Joseph stimulated the development of a meeker, humbler, and more submissive Mary" (286).

<sup>9</sup>Katharine M. Rogers, *The Troublesome Helpmate: A History of Misogyny in Literature* (Seattle and London: University of Washington Press, 1966), 21.



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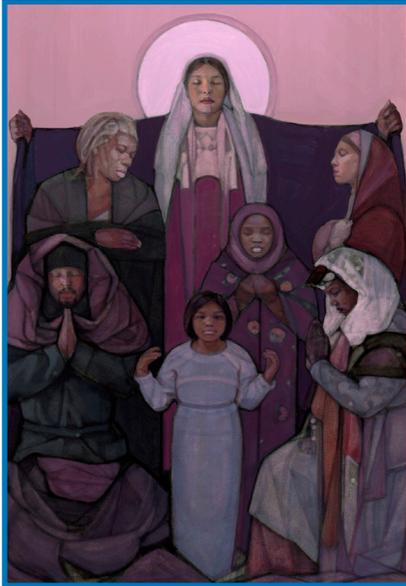
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MARY OF NAZARETH

# Mary, Mother of God



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**FutureChurch**  
 Mary of Nazareth Series Resource

## Holy Virgin, Mother of God When Faced with Impossible Standards

Many Catholics have struggled with the enigmatic images of Mary received in the tradition acknowledged most widely through her title, Virgin Mary, Mother of God. The understanding of her as perpetual virgin and idealized mother is fraught with pitfalls for many Catholics today.

Why has the Church focused so strongly on the physical, perpetual virginity of Mary? And can this incongruous pairing of virgin and mother have meaning for Catholics today?

### Writing Mary's Life

Mary's life, her motherhood and her virginity are part of the New Testaments accounts and serve as the initial source from which all other accounts arise. But, even from the beginning, there was no simple consensus about Mary's place in the early community or her symbolism and meaning. Each gospel "remembered" her story differently and interpreted her meaning and role based on the needs of the community in that particular time.

In all the gospel accounts, Mary has the unique role as the mother of Jesus. By some accounts, she and the brothers and sisters of Jesus are cast as outsiders when Jesus makes it clear that primacy in relationships is based on belief and not on blood. But, Mary is also cast as a faithful disciple who follows the early believers, receives the Holy Spirit in the community of

believers fostering the ongoing revelation of God's love and justice in the world.

Beyond the biblical accounts in those first three centuries there was relative silence about Mary in writings and "no public, official veneration of Mary" (Johnson, 116). As a persecuted sect in the Roman empire, the prayers of the early Christians had come to include the names of those who had been murdered for their faith, a remembrance that was carried out in the celebration of feasts in their names. But because Mary was not a martyr, she was not remembered in that way. In fact, most of the theologians in that era do not mention her, and when they did, it was to answer internal and external challenges about the credibility of Jesus Christ as a religious leader and to establish as a fact of faith his full humanity and divinity.

### Perpetual Virginity

Feminist scholar, Jane Schaberg, argues that the apocryphal books *Proto Evangelium of James* (140 – 170 CE) and its sixth century emulation, the *Gospel of Pseudo-Matthew*, exerted an enormous influence on Christian devotion, liturgy, and doctrine and helped shape our modern day understanding of Mary as a virgin mother. She makes the case that early Christians, struggling for acceptability in a culture where Jesus' legitimacy was called into question, developed apologetic accounts of Mary's life that transformed her from a poor Jewish girl who conceived

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Jesus illegitimately through illicit sexual conduct or possibly rape, to a woman of means who had all the protections from male predators available to wealthy women of the day. According to *Proto-James*, the conception and birth of Mary's child, Jesus, was not the result of illicit conduct but of God's own divine intervention. *Proto-James* was written to protect the Christian community from claims that its central figure was nothing more than a counterfeit born out of wedlock (Schaberg, (709).

Elizabeth Johnson illustrates that the understanding of Mary's role and virginity morphed in postbiblical theology. Where Mary's virginity was first understood as a symbol of her unmediated relationship to the God of salvation in the gospel accounts, in the postbiblical environment where Hellenistic norms with their suspicion of the human body and sexuality grew in influence, Mary became every more elevated, idealized and distant. In the Greek understanding, the human spirit was set on a higher plane and the flesh rested on a lower plane. In this setting, Mary's sexuality was submerged to an even greater degree and her virginity took on a progressively permanent character.

In the transition from persecuted sect with its venerated slain martyrs to a bonifide state religion, Christians began to prize an ascetic detachment from bodily pleasures as a new form of martyrdom. Already, in the mid-first century there was a movement of women and virgins "consecrated both in body and spirit" (1 Cor 7:34) who sought to preserve a measure of the egalitarian promise, freedom and friendship of the Jesus movement (Schaberg, 724). In the second and third centuries, growing numbers of women were attracted to ascetic life. When patriarchal norms took for granted that women would become wives and mothers subjected to the rule of male family members, the ascetic virginal life offered women a path of greater autonomy. Virginity was also a condition associated with female prophecy which also received strong resistance from male leaders.

Johnson traces the battle between the flesh and spirit that was being waged by male theologians and writers in the early centuries of the Church where an increasingly strong stream of misogyny against women and their bodies developed. Women were flesh. Marriage was a concession to the flesh along with pregnancy and childbirth. And while the ascetic life was a choice made by women that gave them a greater degree of autonomy, by the fourth century, male religious authorities sought to control those who chose the ascetic life just as male authorities did in families. Virginity became ever

more defined according to patriarchal concerns and more and more, female sexuality was viewed corrupt and corrupting.

As marriage and sexual pleasure were increasingly viewed with suspicion, there was a greater impetus to honor Mary for her pure and perpetual virginity (Johnson, 28). While the New Testament had affirmed that Mary conceived as the Holy Spirit overshadowed her, a new focus on Mary's physical virginity emerged. Mary not only conceived Jesus as a virgin, but gave birth as a virgin and continued her life after the birth of Jesus as a virgin. Her virginity -- with her hymen fully intact -- took on a perpetual symbolism, a sign of her unique and exclusive purity before, during and after birth.

Ambrose, one of the most influential 4th century bishops, aimed his writing and preaching at converts to Christianity. He focused extensively on virgins and widows in several of his treatises seeking to set the boundaries for women and controlling a female existence that was not tied to the patriarchal family where males governed, but instead to the patriarchal church where male religious leaders governed.

Ambrose deemed a consecrated virgin to be a superior individual in comparison to a married woman. But it was not her autonomy or her ministry that he finds commendable. She is praiseworthy because she acts in the manner of a self-emptying wife and mother. In *De Virginibus*, a virgin is the bride of Christ, and as the bride of Christ, she is the church.

"Notice another merit of virginity: Christ is the spouse of a virgin and Christ is, one might say, the spouse of virginal chastity. For virginity belongs to Christ, not Christ to virginity. Thus it was a virgin who married, a virgin who carried us in her womb, a virgin who have birth, a virgin who nursed with her own milk" (*De Virginibus* I. 5.22).

According to Ambrose, virgins are a race that receive the gifts of the Holy Spirit. But the gifts they receive are not the uncontrollable prophetic brand where women speak God's message, nor are they the ministerial and governance brand that could somehow undermine male authorities. Ambrose relegates virgins to the private sphere. The consecrated virgin will receive royalty because she is wed to a king and because her body does not fall into the traps of pleasure.

Ambrose sets out well defined prescriptions for the virgin's way of life. Virgins are chaste in mind and body. They ex-

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hibit the virtues of temperance, fortitude, modesty, and sobriety. They live quietly at home, attend church, and help the needy. They are to be cheerful and studious. They are to practice moderation in eating and abstinence from wine. They are to avoid the temptation of talkativeness and gossip.

Ambrose's prescriptions set the women who chose them apart for this life of perpetual virginity was the new martyrdom that guaranteed entrance into heaven.

Jerome, too, valorized lifelong virginity as the holier way that led to a higher place in heaven. He granted that marriage was good in that it produced virgins who could avoid marriage. Women already married could become holy if they stopped having sex and practiced virginal chastity within marriage.

Still, 4th century debates exposed a great divide. The asceticism that influenced that era's view of Mary was not accepted by all. Two writers, Helvidius and Jovinian opposed the idea of Mary's perpetual virginity. They believed it diminished marriage, sex and children as a gift from God and devalued Christians who were not virgins. They argued that while Mary conceived Jesus as a virgin, her marriage to Joseph involved sexual relations that produced the brothers and sisters named in the Gospels. As Johnson argues, while their views were more in accord with Church tradition up to that point, Ambrose and Jerome proved to be more influential in shaping the meaning of Mary's virginity and the idea of perpetual virginity won out (Johnson, 29).

As misogynistic scripts eliminated Mary's sexuality, Mary's virginity became detached from its original Gospel significance as a testimony to the presence of God in Christ. Instead it

symbolized a physical value in itself – an emblem of an exclusive holiness possessed by the few" (Johnson, 29). The symbol of the Virgin Mary functioned in part to promote ecclesiastical control of female virgins, thought of as "married" to God or Christ and represented by the male clergy (Schaberg, 724).

## Re-Imagining Mary's Virginity for Today

According to Elizabeth Johnson, there has been a plasticity to the image of Mary that has allowed the Christian imagination to create widely different marian symbols and theologies in relation to the spiritual and social needs of the day. Reclaiming the meaning of Mary's virginity for today is one task that women have taken up after a millennia of male-dominated constructions and prescriptions rooted in hostility toward women's sexuality and autonomy.

Feminist scholars in general agree that the virginal life afforded early Christian women with an alternative to the commodification of patriarchal marriage where women and children were considered property. Elizabeth Johnson rightly asserts that early Christian women fought for the opportunity to be virgins, which in the patriarchal society in which they lived allowed them to "dispose of their bodies as they pleased by keeping them out of circulation" (Johnson, 59). As more women moved outside of patriarchal marriage, churchmen sought to reign them in by recasting virginity within a patriarchal value system -- a system fraught with suspicion of the body -- especially women's bodies. Thus, male theologians and leaders wove a Mary who was a "silent, submissive, and obedient" brand of virginity (Johnson, 61).

Still, while employing Mary's virginity as a tool for co-opting women's quest

for independence, the very notion of virginity has been characterized by the rejection of male control -- a subversive symbol where, "Women could be valued as persons in themselves without being identified with a man" (Johnson, 62).

Noting that "bodies can enact virginity in different ways", Julia A. Feder argues that the symbolism of perpetual virginity is still useful today as a sign of perpetual freedom from patriarchal control (Feder, 22). First, she shows that even within the tradition, the notion of virginity was not always identical with physical virginity -- hymens intact -- especially in cases of rape where virginity was not destroyed by violent acts.

Thus, the paradoxical titles of Mary as both mother and virgin can be retrieved from limiting patriarchal messaging about the meaning of motherhood, virginity and womanhood. Feder argues that within and beyond the tradition the notion of perpetual virginity is best defined as the embodied expression of a spiritual state of autonomy which may or may not include engagement in sexual activity. She argues that Mary's virginity is an inclusive prototype for autonomy. Women can take on the title of virgin continuing the tradition of imitation of Mary by adopting a diversity of lifestyles— lifestyles that differ from that which Mary adopted as well as lifestyles that differ from each other. Some may choose to engage in sexual activity and others not, some may marry and others not, some may give birth and/or raise children and others not.

Korean feminist theologian Chung Hyun Kyung similarly sees positive value in a critical understanding of Mary as a model of perpetual virginity apart from an ethics of sexual abstinence. Chung argues that teachings concerning Mary's virginity are best understood as statements about Mary's independence, her refusal to derive her value exclusively



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from her relationships to men, and as an inner integrity rooted in “her true connectedness to her own self and to God.” For Kyung, this is the kind of virginity that is not lost with sexual experience, but rather grows in direct proportion to life experiences as one ages (Feder, 22).

Given this definition, Feder asks the obvious, “If perpetual virginity is stripped of its former meaning, why continue to use it at all?” For Feder there is a practical fact of Catholic faith to consider. Mary’s perpetual virginity is so deeply threaded throughout the tradition even to the point of being a defined doctrine of the Church, that its symbolism is not going away. Further, idealizing Mary as the perfect model of female discipleship is frequently cited in ongoing efforts to restrict women’s movement and roles in the Church. Thus the effort to re-define the concept is part of the feminist project and obligation for the future health of the Church.

Today women around the world are reclaiming Mary’s meaning and symbolism and re-appropriating it for their own struggles for dignity, equality and autonomy. Elizabeth Johnson suggests that we free Mary from the tradition that gave her an exulted, but second class role in the governance of the Church as the obedient daughter, virgin and mother of the Church. In its stead we should let God’s imagery encapsulate female imagery as well as male imagery which has had primacy throughout the tradition, an imagery that is richer and would help open the Church to the gifts of women in the shaping of Church teaching, doctrine and pastoral practice. One path for engaging in this faithful work is to explore the richness in the image of Mary as “sister” who accompanies women in their struggles. From Elizabeth Johnson’s book, *Truly Our Sister*, comes the voices of women around the world who have long ago begun to see her in just this way.

“For poor women Mary is not a heavenly creature but shares in their lives as a comrade and sister in the struggle.” *Maria Pilar Aquino, Mexico*

“Mary is our “sister; a woman in solidarity with other women and the oppressed.” *Chung Hyun Kyung, Korea*

“It is Mary of the Gospels, on whose lips is placed the Magnificat, who is seen as a colleague by women around the world who are rediscovering that they have a mission in society and church...[Her] face is no longer only that of Our Lady, glorious Queen of Heaven, but also and primarily an elder sister and traveling companion.” *Ivone Gebara and Maria Clara Bingemer, Brazil (Johnson, dedication page)*

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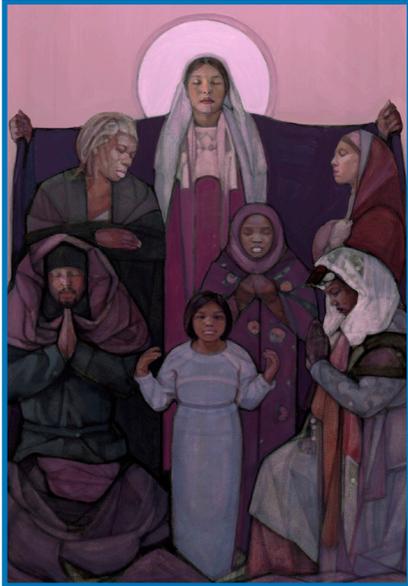
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MARY OF NAZARETH

# Mary, Mother of God



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## Mary in the Age of Complementarity by Deborah Rose-Milavec

The New Testament attests to the fact that Mary of Nazareth was indeed the historical mother of Jesus. Mary helped shape Jesus's character and beliefs from his earliest days as a child and inspired in him a prophetic understanding of God's justice and care for the poor, marginalized, and those considered "least" among humankind. As poor Jewish mother living in the small town of Nazareth, she knew economic poverty, social disenfranchisement and the repressive regime that ultimately murdered her son. After her son's death, she was part of the gathering of disciples who received the Spirit of God that sent them to proclaim the good news to the wider world.

During the postbiblical era, little seems to have been written about Mary. She was not celebrated with a feast day as were the numerous martyrs who had been murdered for the faith. When she was finally called upon, it was by way of verifying that Jesus was fully human, or to certify that Jesus was fully divine as with the affirmation of her as Theotokos at the Council of Ephesus (431).

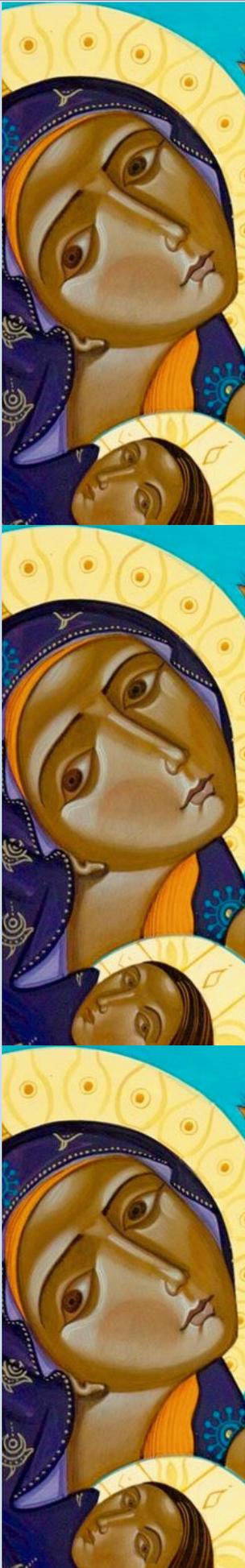
Throughout the history of the Church, Mary's symbolism, image and meaning has taken many forms, changing in relation to the period of time and the social, political and spiritual needs of that era. While many titles have been applied to Mary through the centuries, the Church has continuously focused on her virginal motherhood. Ultimately this emphasis

has served to reinforce rigid role assignments exalting motherhood as the ultimate, divinely inspired calling for all women. Reproduction, either physical or spiritual, is women's primary vocation. Further, Mary's motherhood has been idealized, separating her more and more from the human realm by extricating her from normal human sexual love and later from a normal human birth and death. Mary, the virgin and mother, slowly became the Church's guardian of patriarchal values and structures.

### The Limiting Power of the Church's Two-natured View

To understand how this particular idealization of Mary took shape, it is necessary to understand the Church's historical two-natured view of the world.

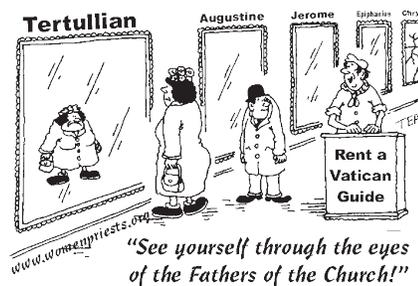
1. The two-natured view of the world is a Greek idea, understood as God's design, where all reality is divided into two spheres -- spirit and matter. Spirit, equated with eternal life, ranks higher and matter is equated with the lower realm of darkness, change and death.
2. When applied to humankind, the two-natured anthropology begins with the obvious biological differences between women and men and elevates those differences to an ontological principle, which, in short hand, means it represents the very essence of a being. Thus women have a



feminine nature and men, a masculine one – a reality that is not temporary but fixed and immutable. Elevating those differences to the level of ontology or “essential difference” becomes a kind of “hands off” divinely sanctioned classification. It is God’s design that the human race is neatly divided into two radically different types of persons.

3. The feminine and the masculine essences are assigned characteristics and ordered. Masculine nature is associated with the higher realm of spirit and marked by reason, independence, analytical capacity, initiative and judgment. Feminine nature is associated with the lower realm of matter and marked by emotion, receptivity, the capacity to nurture, compassion and the capacity to suffer for love.

4. From those ascribed characteristics, roles are assigned in hierarchical fashion and inflexibly. Males, identified with spirit, rank higher and closer to God. They govern. Females, identified with matter because women’s bodies bleed, bear children, and mature into menopause – are governed – and assigned supportive roles. According to Aquinas, “woman is naturally subject to man, because in man the discretion of reason predominates” (Aquinas, ST I-II, Q. 92. A1).



Thus, inequality is built in this inherited two-natured framework. “By nature” and therefore permanently, the world and humankind are divided and ordered. A quick summary of the logic and practical

consequences might look like this according to Johnson.

- Men are to women as spirit is over matter.
- Male is the norm and female is other.
- Mind is valued over body.
- Head is valued over heart.
- Thought is valued over feeling.
- Initiating is over receiving.
- Ruling is over obedience.
- Public is over private.
- Light is valued over darkness
- Heaven is over earth.
- Creator is over the world.
- Christ as bridegroom is over the Church as bride.

Each pair is part of a practical order that assigns superiority and inferiority -- control and subordination. As Elizabeth Johnson states so clearly, “. . . the whole speculative edifice comes about because patriarchal structures have allowed educated men to commandeer the power of naming. They have used this power to label those who differ in distinctly disadvantageous terms” (Johnson, 49).

## Situating Mary in the Two-Natured View

This framework has also formed the grid for interpreting Mary where she has been tooled to address patriarchal concerns. The obedient, receptive and maternal Mary is the ideal embodiment of the feminine essence. Her essence complements or reciprocates the masculine essence of God and Christ who orders, initiates, and fathers. These stereotyped “essences” become the foun-

dation for an “equal but separate” theology, spirituality and ecclesiology that locates the power to decide and govern within the Church in all things male.

## Marian Doctrine in the Age of Complementarity

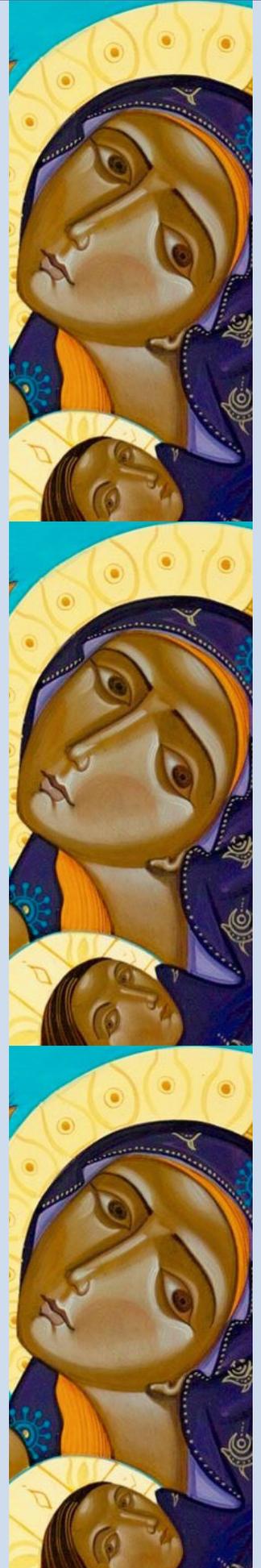
We know that for much of our Christian history, the conviction that women were by nature and by divine plan inferior to men has played a major role in the development of our theologies, traditions, canons, ministerial and governance structures. From Tertullian who called women “the devil’s gateway” to Aquinas who saw women as defective males, women were scapegoated and their agency policed by men. And in that mix, Mary became increasingly idealized.

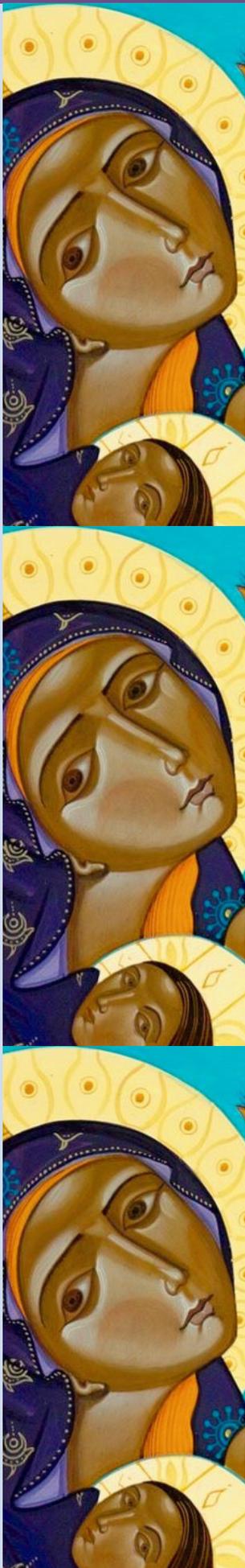
In the 17th century Mariology as a branch of theology separate from Christology emerged, and in the 19th century, with the proliferation of Marian apparitions and miracles, the movement intensified. Titles for her proliferated, her privileged stature flourished, and in a relatively short period, two dogmas that continued to idealize her existence and distance her from human life were proclaimed. In 1854, Mary’s immaculate conception, the notion that she was conceived without sin, was declared dogma and in 1950, Pius XII declared that she was assumed into heaven, body and soul. It was not until Vatican II that Mary’s devotionalism underwent revision.

However, as Mary was becoming ever more idealized, women were carving out greater freedoms for themselves in society. Popes, who throughout most of history felt free to describe women’s relationship to men and the Church explicitly in terms of subordination and inferiority, found that language ineffectual as women began winning their rights in societies. Seismic political, economic and social shifts produced Women’s suffrage, the Universal Declaration of Human Rights (1948) and the Convention on the Rights of Women in Politics (1952). New visions emerged for women’s dignity, freedom, and equality. Time honored categories of identity began to erode. The walls that had separated the private sphere from the public were crumbling, and along with it, rigid gendered roles.

Pius XI, was one of the last popes to explicitly declare women’s subordination. In his 1930 encyclical, *Casti Connubii*, he sharply chastises women as they quest for equality and reminds them they are to be obedient to their husbands.

74. The same false teachers who try to dim the luster of conjugal faith and purity do not scruple to do away with the honorable and trusting obedience which the woman owes to the man. Many of them even go further and assert that such a subjection of one party to the other is unworthy of human dignity, that the rights of husband and wife are equal; wherefore, they boldly proclaim the emancipation of women has been or ought to be effected. This emancipation in their ideas must be threefold, in the ruling of the domestic society, in the administration of family affairs and in the rearing of the children. It must be social, economic, physiological: - physiological, that is to say, the woman is to be freed at her own good pleasure from the burdensome duties properly belonging to a wife as companion and mother (We have already said that this is not an emancipation but a crime); social, inasmuch as the wife being freed from the cares of





children and family, should, to the neglect of these, be able to follow her own bent and devote herself to business and even public affairs; finally economic, whereby the woman even without the knowledge and against the wish of her husband may be at liberty to conduct and administer her own affairs, giving her attention chiefly to these rather than to children, husband and family.

75. This, however, is not the true emancipation of woman, nor that rational and exalted liberty which belongs to the noble office of a Christian woman and wife; it is rather the debasing of the womanly character and the dignity of motherhood, and indeed of the whole family, as a result of which the husband suffers the loss of his wife, the children of their mother, and the home and the whole family of an ever watchful guardian. More than this, this false liberty and unnatural equality with the husband is to the detriment of the woman herself, for if the woman descends from her truly regal throne to which she has been raised within the walls of the home by means of the Gospel, she will soon be reduced to the old state of slavery (if not in appearance, certainly in reality) and become as amongst the pagans the mere instrument of man.

**As women's rights and equality became increasingly normative, the magisterium slowly embraced notions of equality for women, albeit with qualifications.**

But 15 years later, papal language began to reflect the greater equality women were winning. As women's rights and equality became increasingly normative, the magisterium slowly embraced notions of equality for women, albeit with qualifications. Men and women were equal, but with distinct and complementary characteristics and gifts. They reasoned that the greater the difference between women and men, the more humanity needs the complementary collaboration of the two to complete the whole. Thus, in the second half of the twentieth century, they made the case that it is essential to include women in decision-making and teaching -- in society. But because gender duality with male personhood have a primacy of place, the Church exempted itself from that same logic. A refined and thus more convincing construction emerged -- the "equal but separate" logic of complementarity.

On October 21, 1945, Pope Pius XII gave an address to Catholic Women's Associations on Women's Duties in Social and Political Life which included the "distinctive and complementary qualities of the sexes."

As children of God, man and woman have a dignity in which they are absolutely equal . . . But man and woman cannot maintain or perfect this equal dignity of theirs unless they respect and make use of the distinctive qualities which nature has bestowed on each sex: physical and spiritual qualities which are indestructible, and so coordinated that their mutual relation cannot be upset without nature itself intervening to reestablish it. These peculiar characteristics which distinguish the sexes are so obvious to everybody that nothing short of

willful blindness, or a doctrinaire attitude as disastrous as it is utopian, can ignore or fail to see their importance in the structure of society. Indeed, this co-ordination of the sexes through the characteristics peculiar to each is such as to extend its influence to every single manifestation of the social life of man.

Where, on the contrary, the sexes disregard the intimate and harmonious relations which God has established and willed to subsist between them, and indulge instead in a perverse individualism; . . .

In a 1956 speech, his complementary view came into full view again.

So we have an absolute equality in personal and fundamental values, but different functions, which are complementary and superbly equivalent, and from them arise the various rights and duties of the one and the other. (The Dignity of Women (speech), 1956 found in *Contra Legem: A Matter of Conscience*)

In 1962, in speaking to a congress of women, John XXIII employed the language of complementarity in addressing women's equality. Yet, notably, in his seminal 1963 encyclical, *Pacem in Terris*, he was able to affirm that equality while forgoing complementarity to circumscribe it.

Two years later (1965) *Gaudium et Spes* affirmed that

. . . every type of discrimination, whether social or cultural, whether based on sex, race, color, social condition, language or religion, is to be overcome and eradicated as contrary to God's intent (GS 29).

Although *Gaudium et Spes*, writ large, supports women's full dignity, it is also hampered by the two-natured system of thought that underpins complementarity. The extent of the teaching's power to overcome the sin of discrimination is limited by its perspective on women's "nature" and "proper roles" (GS 60).

And while Mary's privileges and stand-alone authority was subordinated to the Vatican II vision of Church found in her placement and treatment in *Lumen Gen-*

*tium*., her symbolism did not escape the Church's dualisms. The conciliar treatment of Mary as model of the church, cites her as the perfection of the feminine. She is not leader, but "Advocate, Helper, Benefactress and Mediatrix (LG 62). Mary as "the Mother of God is a model of the Church in the matter of faith, charity and perfect union with Christ" (LG 63). As Elizabeth Johnson points out, what Vatican II did not say is equally significant. Mary is not a model of the Church in pastoral leadership, governing, preaching and administering the sacraments. She is a complement to Peter's role who leads and governs (66).

Pope Paul VI had a mixed record on generating greater roles for women. He was the first pope to invite women as auditors -- 23 in all -- to Vatican II in years 3 and 4. But it is clear that though he valued women's participation at some level, he was careful to control their movement. In 1973 he set up a special commission to study the function of women in church and society that was premised on the equal but complementary roles and functions of women and men. He even sent a secret document to curia heads and several bishops' conferences defining what could be discussed and what would not be discussed -- namely women's ordination. A few years later in 1976, the CDF Declaration *Inter Insigniores* asserted that women did not image Christ and that the Church did not have the authority to permit women to Holy Orders. Complementarity, the "equal, but distinct" logic applied.

" . . . equality is in no way identity, for the Church is a differentiated body, in which each individual has his or her role. The roles are distinct, and must not be confused (II 6)."

## Hans Urs von Balthasar: Employing Mary to Underwrite Complementarity

Exerting the greatest influence over the Church's teachings on women, Pope John Paul II penned the modern chapter on complementarity. He did it with Mary at his side. But, in order to understand John Paul II's constructions and that of his successors, it is necessary to understand the underwriter of the charter on complementarity, Hans Urs von Balthasar. John Paul II favored him so highly that he fitted him for a red hat in 1988 although Balthasar died before he could receive that honor. Joseph



Ratzinger, also he founded the journal *Communio* with Balthasar.

Mary is a central figure and symbol in Balthasar's theology and ecclesiology. His close relationship to Adrienne von Speyr, a Catholic convert and medical doctor, who claimed to have regular mystical experiences of Mary had a profound effect on his own thought and writings.

Balthasar defined the world in binaries -- spirit/body, man/woman, individual/community and understood the distinction between sexes as an ontological reality. What was masculine and what was feminine became the basis for defining gender roles. Man is active, spirit, individual, autonomous. Woman is recipient, body, community, relationship. Although he espoused a kind of equality between equality between men and

**Marian symbolism becomes ecclesial symbolism to the erasure of the existence of actual historical women. ~Elizabeth Johnson**

women - that equality was conditional – complementary and reciprocal. And since Christ became incarnate in the male flesh and not female flesh, males had priority.

The ultimate symbol for God's plan for salvation was the married heterosexual couple. Mary was the ideal bride who, as virgin, spouse, daughter and mother symbolized the church as the feminine while God and Christ represented the masculine. For Balthasar, the most profound dimension of salvation was expressed when these two related reciprocally -- as complements – as a man and woman in a patriarchal conjugal

relationship. (Johnson, 57).

But Mary, is a very particular kind of bride. She is the perfect complement to the masculine energies of God and Christ. Reading the gospels, Balthasar finds a Mary who is silent, self-effacing, self-giving and lovingly obedient to God, to her son. These categories are so dominant that when reading John's account of the wedding at Cana, his reading flies in the face of the story itself. When Mary responds to Jesus' rebuff with an order to the servants to, "Do whatever he tells you" (John 2:5), Balthasar sees a Mary who is not willful, who does not assert her authority. Instead she abdicates her self-will when she goes around Jesus – led by her heart -- to affirm mercy in an embarrassing situation. She gets things done, but only as a meek woman who would never confront her son. The rigidity of his dualistic and ordered categories are brightly exposed in his Mary -- the woman who "has her heart where it ought to be and not in her brain" (Balthasar cited in Johnson, 59).

Balthasar's theological polarity served as a foundation for his dualistic understanding of the nature and structure of the church. The church had twin dimensions - the masculine and the feminine - the Petrine and the Marian.

Mary, embodying the feminine dimension, initiates the church with her "yes" to God at the annunciation. A handmaid, the symbol of the mystery of grace at the heart of the church, she is the bride prepared and presented by the bridegroom -- to himself, for himself – as a sacrifice – exclusively at his disposal. Her "yes" is an act of faith, an unconditional, self-effacing obedience to her son – an obedience that characterizes the rest of her life as Mary the

model of the church. Moreover, it is her virginal self-emptying, totally dis-possessing “yes” that allows her to become a receptacle for the Holy Spirit that should be the mark of every baptized person, but especially women.

The interior receptive response to God is given a romanticized primacy in Balthasar’s thought. The Marian dimension is more important than the Petrine because Peter denied Christ while Mary remained true throughout. The Marian dimension is more important because, “Before male office makes its entrance in the Church, the Church as woman and helpmate is already on the scene.” The Marian face of the church “is deeper and closer to the center than any other aspect.” The Marian dimension holds sway “in a hidden manner” just as “the woman does in the household” (Balthasar cited in Johnson, 59).

In a twisting logic, Balthasar argues that men are included in the feminine dimension because they are part of the Church. And, they are also the masculine dimension. So while men are part of both the feminine and masculine dimensions of the Church, the converse is not true. Women are part of the feminine dimension but cannot be part of the masculine. Employing a very peculiar rationale to explain this construction Balthasar writes, “The institution is the guarantee of the enduring presence of the bridegroom Christ to the bride, the Church. This is why it is entrusted to men who, although they belong to the comprehensive femininity of the Church, are taken from her midst and, while remaining in her, embody Christ who approaches the Church to impregnate her.”

According to Balthasar, while the church

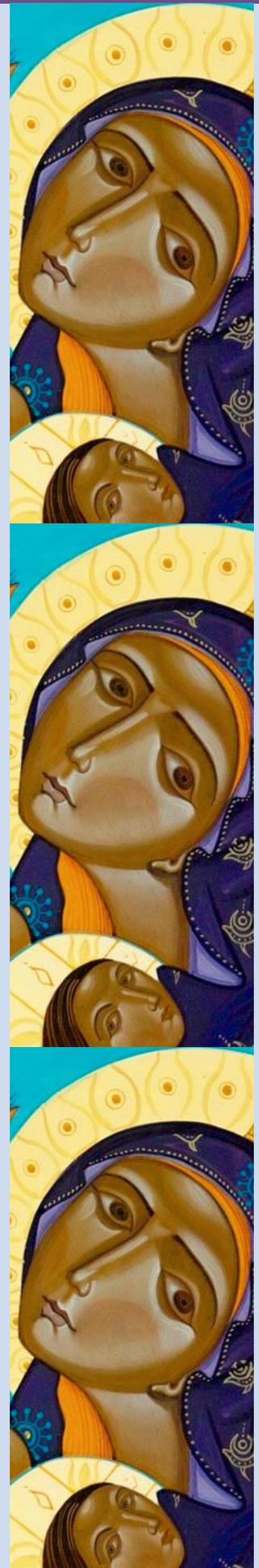
cannot last without this fruitful subjective Marian response to God’s masculine, divine grace, it is in need of an objective force to guide it and uphold it. Thus, Peter and by extension, the masculine Petrine dimension of the church is charged with leadership, mission and unity made manifest through the sacraments, preaching and governance. The Marian tradition of holy obedience complements the Petrine tradition of orderly hierarchal rule.

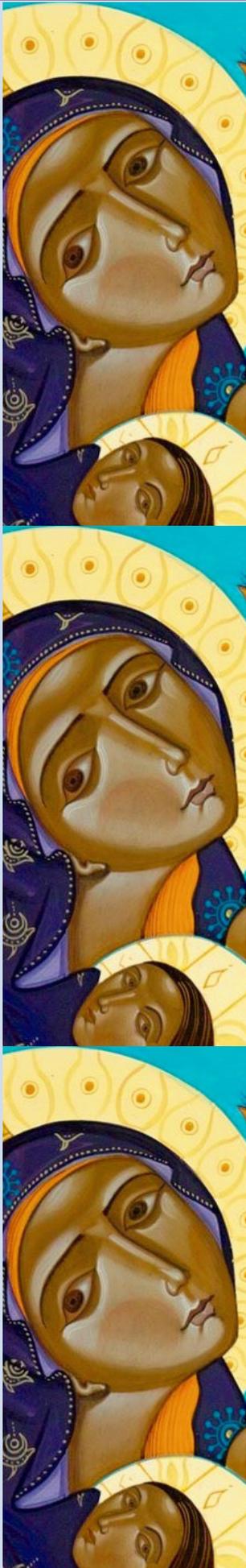
As Elizabeth Johnson points out, Balthasar’s “Marian symbolism becomes ecclesial symbolism to the erasure of the existence of actual historical women in the church with their spiritual and political agency” (Johnson, 60). Mary becomes the abstract woman who is receptive to masculine grace who becomes an idealized spirituality called the church. The all-male hierarchy governs in the name of the Bridegroom – Christ. Thus, the Petrine dimension manifests leadership, autonomy and initiative and produces the authors and architects of the tradition. The Marian dimension expresses assent, obedience, and fruitfulness and produces the receivers of the tradition.

### **John Paul II’s Complementarity: The “Equal but Separate” Clause**

John Paul II focused on some aspect of Mary in seventy different general audiences throughout his pontificate. He wrote extensively about her, using her symbolism as a teaching tool for women and for the entire Church.

In unprecedented fashion, John Paul II sought to shape, in some areas expand, but also restrict the roles of women. A prolific writer, he penned the modern chapter on complementarity and





provided, what for many, is a convincing anthropological and theological framework that advanced the Church's support for women's equality in the world as a new fact of faith, while masterfully polishing the logic that would exempt the institutional church from those same principles. He was deeply influenced by the work of Hans Urs von Balthasar.

I argue that John Paul's complementarity functions as the Church's "Equal but Separate" Clause, a soft system of suppression for half the Catholic population -- women. Although it relies on the use of magisterial sway instead of outright force, like Jim Crow or Apartheid, the teaching advances freedom and dignity by heralding a limited equality that will not upend the status quo. The key power structures remain in place, while working vigorously to keep a sector of those people separate and without the means to govern and shape their destinies within a society or an institution.

In this fashion, John Paul II teaches in no uncertain terms that women and men are equal as persons before God. This equality shows up with particular brilliance in his teaching that husband and wives are equal in marriage. But the equality he espouses is eclipsed by his commitment to the traditional notion that men and women embody human nature in two radically different ways with radically different roles, vocations, gifts and capacities. While he claims these two natures, masculine and feminine work reciprocally and equally as "the unity of the two", in practice, inequality is still a prominent fixture.

Following Balthasar's framework, John Paul II locates Mary with his schema. She symbolizes the feminine Marian

dimension and is assigned characteristics that support patriarchal magisterial power to control the movement of women in the body politic of the Church. Intensely exalted, Mary is assigned feminine functions, and held up as the model for all women.

Whatever is true about women's dignity, virtue and vocation is located in within the male defined horizons of John Paul's Marian construction. According to John Paul II in *Redemptoris Mater*:

This Marian dimension of Christian life takes on special importance in relation to women and their status. In fact, femininity has a unique relationship with the Mother of the Redeemer, a subject which can be studied in greater depth elsewhere. Here I simply wish to note that the figure of Mary of Nazareth sheds light on womanhood as such by the very fact that God, in the sublime event of the Incarnation of his Son, entrusted himself to the ministry, the free and active ministry of a woman. It can thus be said that women, by looking to Mary, find in her the secret of living their femininity with dignity and of achieving their own true advancement. In the light of Mary, the Church sees in the face of women the reflection of a beauty which mirrors the loftiest sentiments of which the human heart is capable: the self-offering totality of love; the strength that is capable of bearing the greatest sorrows; limitless fidelity and tireless devotion to work; the ability to combine penetrating intuition with words of support and encouragement. (RM 46).

As Elizabeth Johnson notes, while the virtues are praiseworthy they are feminine and not applied to men. In fact,

“they are the habits of the helper, the auxiliary, the handmaid, not that of the resister of oppression – let alone the self-actualizing creative leader” (Johnson, 63).

**While the virtues are praiseworthy they are feminine and not applied to men . . . they are the habits of the helper. ~ Elizabeth Johnson**

Further, John Paul has no hesitation in cautioning women about going too far. While clearly naming male domination as sinful, he warns that even the efforts to correct that sin “must not under any condition lead to the masculinization of women” a warning that Pope Francis has also proffered during his papacy. In the name of liberation from male domination, women must not appropriate to themselves male characteristics contrary to their own feminine originality, but must live according to the special qualities proper to the fact of her femininity” (MD 10).

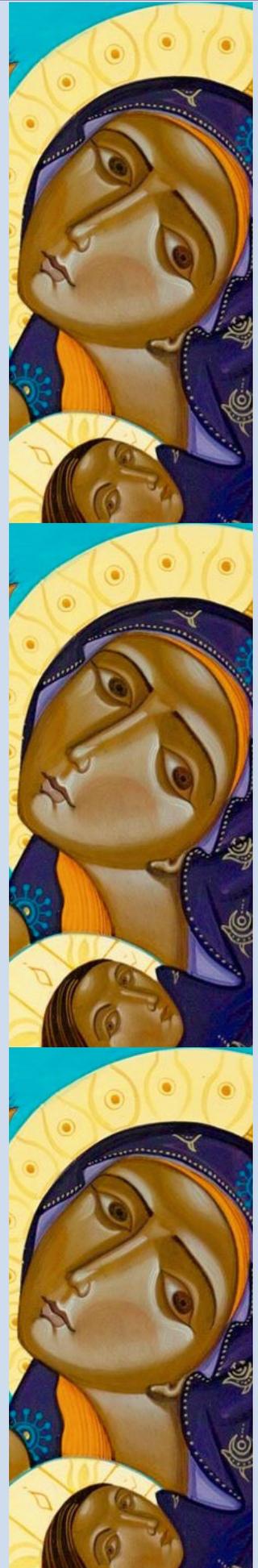
John Paul’s ideal of Mary is applied to the nature and structure of the Church and becomes the Marian dimension just as it does in Balthasar’s writing. The Marian dimension represents the feminine, maternal, self-giving face of the Church, different from and complementary to the ministerial, hierarchical, governing Petrine dimension of the Church.

Men go out into the world. They govern while women do not. As Johnson points, John Paul’s template for dividing the world into the feminine roles and masculine roles is so powerful that in his reading of Acts, even when the biblical text shows otherwise, he denies that Mary received the Apostolic call.

Built by Christ upon the Apostles, the Church became fully aware of these mighty works of God on the day of Pentecost, when those gathered together in the Upper Room “were all filled with the Holy Spirit and began to speak in other tongues, as the Spirit gave them utterance” (Acts 2:4). From that moment there also begins that journey of faith, the Church’s pilgrimage through the history of individuals and peoples. We know that at the beginning of this journey Mary is present. We see her in the midst of the Apostles in the Upper Room, “prayerfully imploring the gift of the Spirit” (MD 59)

For John Paul, Mary had already received the Holy Spirit showing itself in her obedience and in her willingness to abandon herself totally. She leads them spiritually, but not physically.

In a sense her journey of faith is longer. The Holy Spirit had already come down upon her, and she became his faithful spouse at the Annunciation, welcoming the Word of the true God, offering “the full submission of intellect and will . . . and freely assenting to the truth revealed by him,” indeed abandoning herself to-





tally to God through “the obedience of faith,”<sup>60</sup> whereby she replied to the angel: “Behold, I am the handmaid of the Lord; let it be to me according to your word.” The journey of faith made by Mary, whom we see praying in the Upper Room, is thus longer than that of the others gathered there: Mary “goes before them,” “leads the way” for them.<sup>61</sup> The moment of Pentecost in Jerusalem had been prepared for by the moment of the Annunciation in Nazareth, as well as by the Cross. In the Upper Room Mary’s journey meets the Church’s journey of faith. In what way?

Among those who devoted themselves to prayer in the Upper Room, preparing to go “into the whole world” after receiving the Spirit, some had been called by Jesus gradually from the beginning of his mission in Israel. Eleven of them had been made Apostles, and to them Jesus had passed on the mission which he himself had received from the Father. “As the Father has sent me, even so I send you” (Jn. 20:21), he had said to the Apostles after the Resurrection. And forty days later, before returning to the Father, he had added: “when the Holy Spirit has come upon you . . . you shall be my witnesses. . . to the end of the earth” (cf. Acts 1:8). This mission of the Apostles began the moment they left the Upper Room in Jerusalem. The Church is born and then grows through the testimony that Peter and the Apostles bear to the Crucified and Risen Christ (cf. Acts 2:31-34; 3:15-18; 4:10-12; 5:30-32). (Redemptoris Mater, 26)

Finally, John Paul concludes that Mary did not receive the apostolic mission. As he and so many of his male predecessors have done, against the evidence of the text, he interprets Mary’s vocation in a very limited way that keeps male power in place.

Mary did not directly receive this apostolic mission. She was not among those whom Jesus sent “to the whole world to teach all nations” (cf. Mt. 28:19) when he conferred this mission on them. But she was in the Upper Room, where the Apostles were preparing to take up this mission with the coming of the Spirit of Truth: she was present with them. In their midst Mary was “devoted to prayer” as the “mother of Jesus” (cf. Acts 1:13-14), of the Crucified and Risen Christ. And that first group of those who in faith looked “upon Jesus as the author of salvation,”<sup>62</sup> knew that Jesus was the Son of Mary, and that she was his Mother, and that as such she was from the moment of his conception and birth a unique witness to the mystery of Jesus, that mystery which before their eyes had been disclosed and confirmed in the Cross and Resurrection. Thus, from the very first moment, the Church “looked at” Mary through Jesus, just as she “looked at” Jesus through Mary. For the Church of that time and of every time Mary is a singular witness to the years of Jesus’ infancy and hidden life at Nazareth, when she “kept all these things, pondering them in her heart” (Lk. 2:19; cf. Lk. 2:51).

Pope Benedict XVI and Pope Francis have carried John Paul’s complementary vision forward, although some have argued that Francis’s version is more complex and evidences a certain historical consciousness.

## Pope Benedict XVI: Enforcing Marian Codes

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As head of the Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith, Joseph Ratzinger, an erudite theologian, was deeply suspicious of feminist theology and its critique of the gender dualism of complementarity employed by the magisterium. Some contend that the present day suspicion of the understanding of gender that borders on hysteria in Rome with was generated during the Ratzinger era.

In The Ratzinger Report, a series of interviews on the state of the church in 1984, he thought it

. . . necessary to get to the bottom of the demand that radical feminism draws from the widespread modern culture, namely the ‘trivialization’ of sexual specificity that makes every role interchangeable between man and woman. . . . Detached from the bond with fecundity, sex no longer appears to be a determined characteristic, as a radical and pristine orientation of the person. Male? Female? They are questions that for some are now viewed as obsolete, senseless, if not racist. The answer of current conformism is foreseeable: ‘whether one is male or female has little interest for us, we are all simply humans.’ This in reality has grave consequences even if at first appears very beautiful and generous (Ratzinger 1985: 95).

He defended John Paul II’s *Ordinatio Sacerdotalis* by reiterating John Paul’s idea that Mary did not receive the apostolic mission, an idea rooted in complementarity’s framework.

In the Letter *Ordinatio Sacerdotalis* the Pope focuses attention on the figure of the Blessed Virgin Mary, Mother of God, and Mother of the Church. The fact that she “received neither the mission proper to the Apostles nor the ministerial priesthood clearly shows that the non-admission of women to priestly ordination cannot mean that women are of lesser dignity, nor can it be construed as discrimination against them” (n. 3). Diversity of mission in no way compromises equality of personal dignity.

Again in his role as CDF prefect he wrote a letter addressing the bishops of the world on how men and women should collaborate, he wrote

Above all, the fact that human beings are persons needs to be underscored: “Man is a person, man and woman equally so, since both were created in the image and likeness of the personal God”.<sup>10</sup> Their equal dignity as persons is realized as physical, psychological and ontological complementarity, giving rise to a harmonious relationship of “uni-duality,” which only sin and “the structures of sin” inscribed in culture render potentially conflictual (8).

And in that same document, Ratzinger exhortations are in continuity with John Paul II and Balthasar. Mary is “the mirror” (15) of the Church and her feminine characteristics are exalted as what God would expect of all, but especially women.

Far from giving the Church an identity based on an historically conditioned model of femininity, the reference to Mary, with her dispositions of listening, welcoming, humility, faithfulness, praise and waiting, places the Church in continuity with the spiritual history of Israel. In Jesus and through him, these attributes become the vocation of every baptized Christian. Regardless of conditions, states of life, different vocations with or without public responsibilities, they are an essential aspect of Christian life. While these traits should be characteristic of every baptized person, women in fact live them with particular intensity and naturalness. In this way, women play a role of maximum importance in the Church’s life by recalling these dispositions to all the baptized and contributing in a unique way to showing the true face of the Church, spouse of Christ and mother of believers (16).

As head of the Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith, Joseph Ratzinger helped codify the enforcement of *Ordinatio Sacerdotalis*. With the 1998 issuance of *Ad Tuendam Fidem*, the Vatican sought to silence and punish Catholic dissent on this issue. When elected as pope, then Benedict XVI continued his efforts to keep women in place through a series of investigations of women religious in the United States that was met with profound outrage by a great many of the faithful.

## Francis: A Nuanced Sustainer

Pope Francis has done more to raise the hopes of Catholics seeking Vatican II reform than any pope in nearly 40



years. His focus on social justice has gladdened hearts. But his record on advancing women in the Church has been dim and his complementary framework with its Marian and Petrine dimensions with accompanying distribution of roles for women and men is prominent. His homily for the Solemnity of Mary, the Mother of God on January 1, 2015 illuminates his dichotomous view.

... inseparable are Christ and the Church – because the Church and Mary are always together and this is precisely the mystery of womanhood in the ecclesial community – and the salvation accomplished by Jesus cannot be understood without appreciating the motherhood of the Church.

Still his understanding of complementarity seems to engage a historical consciousness that was not present in his predecessors. In his opening remarks at the 2014 Humanum Conference which focused on the family, he took as his model for complementarity the non-sex specific notion in 1 Cor. 12 that ‘the Spirit has endowed each of us with different gifts’ saying:

When we speak of complementarity between man and woman in this context, let us not confuse that term with the simplistic idea that all the roles and relations of the two sexes are fixed in a single, static pattern. Complementarity will take many forms as each man and woman brings his or her distinctive contributions to their marriage and to the formation of their children—his or her personal richness, personal charisma (Pope Francis 2014).

On the plane home from the Philip-

pinas, although his complementarity is in full view, he exhibits some willingness to grow.

We have not yet understood in depth what the feminine genius can give us, what woman can give to society and also to us. Maybe women see things in a way that complements the thoughts of men. It is a path to follow with greater creativity and courage.

Still, while one may find some measure of hope in his openness, on balance thus far, with Mary at his side, he brings his predecessors’ application of complementarity, suspicions about the dangers of feminism, and cataclysmic view of gender theory into his off-the-cuff remarks, his speeches and his writings. The remark, “I am wary of masculinity in a skirt,” in a 2013 interview revealed his bias about the dangers of feminism. When women step too far in their quest for full equality with men, even Francis is willing to shame them back into place.

On a plane home from Sweden where he had just met with the primate of the Lutheran Church, a woman, when asked about women’s ordination, he employed Mary. Affirming John Paul II’s ban, he reasoned, “But women can do many other things better than men,” the pope continued, before repeating remarks he has said in the past about the Catholic church having two dimensions: a Petrine, apostolic dimension led by the bishops and a Marian dimension, which he called “the feminine dimension of the church.” People ask me: “Who is more important in the theology or in the spirituality of the church: the apostles or Mary, on the day of Pentecost?” “ he said, adding: “It is Mary!”

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When Francis employs this brand of complementarity, he also insists that Mary, and by extension, women are more important than men. As long as women are perched on a pedestal, the male conscience is soothed and women themselves may be less interested in getting involved with governance – the very access that one half of the People of God need in order to work in full and equal partnership with men to shape the teachings, doctrines, canons, and pastoral and liturgical practices of the Church.

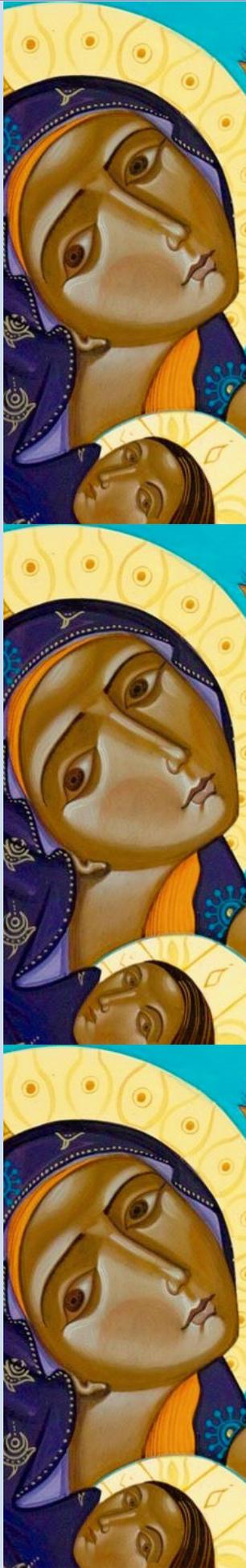
## If not Complementary, then what?

According to Johnson, it is not possible to interpret Mary in a liberating way within the confines of this traditional masculine-feminine dichotomy (Johnson, 67) of complementarity. No matter how elevated the speech about her, Mary signifies a lesser place for women in the church. Ultimately, the rigid system of gender dualism must be deconstructed

### The Fault Lines in Gender Dualism and Complementarity: A Quick Guide

1. Gender dualism originates in traditional patriarchal societies that gave primacy to male authority, which shaped and reflected a biased and distorted view of the social status of women.
2. Gender dualism functions to maintain unjust distribution of social power between women and men by first, neatly dividing them into feminine and masculine essences, and then assigning characteristics and ultimately roles accordingly. The feminine ideal projected onto all women, including Mary, functions to keep men in positions of public power and women in service to them in predetermined, private, and politically powerless roles.
3. Gender dualism gives heterosexual individuals primacy and devalues LGBTQI people. Further, those who vigorously defend the construct are suspicious, hostile and often mete out unjust treatment to those who do not fit the neatly defined categories.
4. Gender dualism is racist and classist. The feminine ideal gives primacy to the privileged, white and middle-class model of the patriarchal family where women could, if they wanted, live out the feminine ideal. Further, it is blind to the ways the feminine ideal has been maintained, often on the backs of women of color.
5. Gender dualism fosters the development of distorted human psyches. The rigid norms of the gender divide make it more difficult for males to embrace and fully integrate repressed characteristics that may be identified as “feminine.” And employing both a carrot and stick, it praises women for following the patriarchal script and shames them when they “overreach” in their quest for full equality, freedom and an equal place at the table when it comes to shaping the very tradition that governs their lives.

Gender Dualism is unjust to women, LGBTQI people and others who do not fit into the neat categories set out by complementarity’s gender dichotomies. Further, it stifles the full potential of both women and men as it works to ignore and suppress the God given gifts, talents and capacities of God’s people. As Natalia Imperatori-Lee wrote so brilliantly in her November 2016 America Magazine article on the pitfalls of complementarity, “If leadership is only Petrine, and Petrine only means clergy, then some men in the church image the masculine aspect of the church while other men (in the laity) image the feminine. But the reverse is impossible: Women, because they cannot be ordained, can only ever image the feminine. . . in reaffirming the Marian and Petrine construct of the church, he [Pope Francis] (intentionally or not) sent a message about the people of God that truncates our imaginations and limits our possibilities for full human flourishing.



and replaced with new models for equality. Christianity, a living tradition, calls us in every age to reconsider and re-imagine the religious symbols of our age, including the meaning Mary brings to our lives.

Already in 1838, Quaker abolitionist Sarah Grimke challenged the two natured view that kept women in a subordinate place. She recognized that both black people and white women were being subjugated according to the dictates of white males. Notions like “proper nature” and “special role(s)” were being propagated as social norms that should bind all citizens. Using the teachings of Jesus as her source, she argued that fundamental to Christian message was its emphasis on freedom and equality. As she reads Jesus’ teachings she finds he makes no distinctions based on “sex or condition.”

. . . I follow him through all his precepts, and find him giving the same directions to women as to men, never even referring to the distinction now so strenuously insisted upon between masculine and feminine virtues: this is one of the anti-christian “traditions of men” which are taught instead of the “commandments of God.” Men and women were CREATED EQUAL [her emphasis]: they are both moral and accountable beings, and whatever is right for man to do, is right for woman.

Rachel Held Evans, New York Times bestselling author of books on contemporary issues in religion and spirituality finds a similar Jesus in relation to women and LGBTQI people.

The gospel of Jesus Christ is not so fragile as to be unpinned by the reality that variations in gender and sexuality exist, nor is it so narrow as to only be good news for people who look and live like Ward and June Cleaver. This glorification of gender binaries has become a dangerous idol in the Christian community, for it conflates cultural norms with Christian morality and elevates an ideal over actual people.

**Humanity is not about one side. It is about both. It’s man, it’s woman; it’s male; it’s female - it’s all together.**

**~Agbonkhianmeghe Orabator , SJ**

In a December 2016 interview, Nigerian Jesuit priest and theologian, Agbonkhianmeghe Orabator spoke out in the same way many women have regarding the travesty of the gender divided church. “I feel almost violated because I feel that my humanity, which should be full and complete on the basis of mutuality and equality, is not being given that opportunity to have that experience of completeness,” said Orabator. Deeply disturbed by male-domination within the church he argues, “Discrimination against women within the Catholic community is so

manifest, that the church totters on the brink of compromising its self identity as the basic sacrament of salvation.” The question, according to Orabator is, “Church where is your sister? Church where is your mother?”

A starkly iconoclastic representation of Mary within the Orthodox tradition came in 2012 when Pussy Riot, a group of three women protesting the abuses of power of Vladimir Putin in Russia and the ongoing cooperation in that abuse by authorities in the Orthodox Church wrote a song calling Mary, the Mother of God to be on their side, appealing to her to help them banish Putin from power. Echoing the sentiments of Mary in the Magnificat, they performed their song in front of the iconostasis in a prominent Orthodox Cathedral. For their efforts they were charged by Church officials, arrested and jailed, a scenario that sounds like the gospel retelling of the story of Jesus’s clash with religious and state authorities after he shocked and angered them by turning over of tables in the temple. Shortly thereafter, Jesus is arrested and persecuted.

## The Basis for an Egalitarian Model of Mary

According to Johnson, it is not possible to interpret Mary in a liberating way within the confines of the traditional masculine-feminine dichotomy (67) of complementarity. No matter how elevated the speech about her, the “equal but distinct” clause relegates Mary and all women to a lesser place in the church. Freeing Mary, and by extension women, from the hierarchical power relations encoded in dualistic complementary views of women is the ongoing task for feminist theology.

Johnson argues that an egalitarian anthropology is better suited as the starting point for today’s Church because it situates women within a model of partnership. In that way, Genesis 1:26-27 is foundational. Without any reference to masculine and feminine identity, characteristics, dimensions or roles, Genesis tells us that God created humanity in God’s image and likeness – male and female.

As embodied people, our essence is not automatically pre-programmed with a prescribed list of God-given characteristics according to our biological sex. Each person develops within the complex matrix of biology, family, community, geography, race, class, culture, etc. Egalitarian anthropology recognizes that there are biological differences that directly relate to the reproduc-

tion of the species but that male-female differences do not pre-determine social roles.

Thus, an egalitarian anthropology values relations of equality, respect and trust between all persons and recognizes human giftedness is manifold and moves across the spectrum of human embodiment. Egalitarian anthropology envisions a redeemed humanity with relationships between women and men marked by mutual partnership.

**Our church leaders must stop telling God where God can and cannot be. They must admit that they cannot control how God can and cannot work...**

**~Jamie Manson**

Catholic commentator, Jamie Manson, sums it up in a 2015 column she wrote on the pitfalls of complementarity:

Our church leaders must, in essence, stop telling God where God can and cannot be. They must admit that they cannot control how God can and cannot work through God’s own people and where God’s sacramental life can and cannot emerge. Only then will we have a church that moves beyond the limits of complementarity and into a new life as a true reflection of the justice of God.

In the 21st century Mary is being reconceived and honored in popular religious practices, in art, and in places where new theological insights can surface. Publicly and corporately, women prominently figure into the re-interpretation of the figure of Mary from the perspective of their own struggle to be autonomous, resilient, dynamic and holy people of faith. Beyond deconstructing the debilitating aspects of Mary’s symbolism, women around the globe are reclaiming her as an ally in their quest to grow and thrive -- in their quest to live out the fullness of their gifts for the life of the church and world.



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tion.”<sup>19</sup> Jesus lived in poverty, and understood those who lived close to the bone. To choose poverty—then as now—deeply challenged the ways of the world. Jesus knew that possessions could be a block to God, and instructed his disciples to travel with no money or extra clothing.<sup>20</sup> He knew that complete dependence on God nourishes the human spirit, and he included this phrase in the prayer he taught: “Give us each day our daily bread.”<sup>21</sup>

The third prophetic theme that Mary brought forward in the Magnificat, and that Jesus amplified, was that God is a God of the humble. She understood that pride had been and continued to be the great weakness of humanity before God, the original sin that drove Adam and Eve to seek to be as gods. The prophet Micah had determined what God required of humanity: “To do justice, and to love kindness, and to walk humbly with your God.”<sup>22</sup> Mary described God as having “looked with favor on the lowliness of his servant,” and having “lifted up the lowly.” Despite the honor she had been given, she maintained a right relationship with God, which Jesus also maintained through the three grueling temptations

in the desert. Later on, when Jesus invited the disciples to follow him, he said, “Learn from me, for I am gentle and humble in heart, and you will find rest for your souls.”<sup>23</sup> And he instructed his followers not to take a place of honor but to take the lowest place at table, “for all who exalt themselves will be humbled, and those who humble themselves will be exalted.”<sup>24</sup>

Those themes of the Magnificat are fully realized and clarified in the life of Jesus. A youthful Mary condemns “the powerful” and “the rich,” as did the prophets of old, and in this we see the roots of what would become Jesus’ teaching. Though we can only speculate on the impact of Mary’s prophetic witness on her son, we might also assume that it was because of her influence that Jesus always took women seriously and urged them toward full status in God’s reign.

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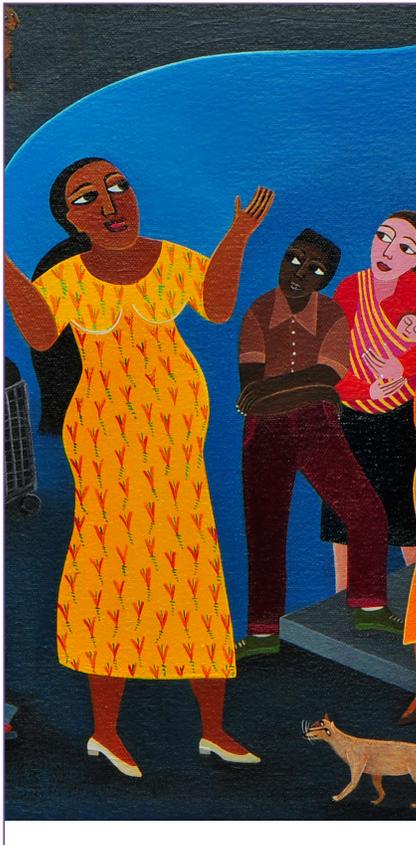
- <sup>1</sup> Excerpted with permission: Penelope Duckworth, *Mary, The Imagination of Her Heart* (Cambridge, MA: Cowley Publications, 2004), 17-25.
- <sup>2</sup> Judges 5:24.
- <sup>3</sup> 1 Samuel 2: 1-10.
- <sup>4</sup> Judith 15: 12-16; 17.
- <sup>5</sup> Exodus 15:20-21.
- <sup>6</sup> Walter Brueggemann, *The Prophetic Imagination* (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1978), 13.
- <sup>7</sup> Genesis 12:2.
- <sup>8</sup> Rubem A. Alves, *The Poet, The Warrior, the Prophet* (Philadelphia: Trinity Press International, 1990), 137.
- <sup>9</sup> Exodus 15:20.
- <sup>10</sup> *A Commentary on Pseudo-Philo’s Liber Antiquitatum Biblicarum*, vol. 1, trans. H. Jacobson (Leiden: Brill, 1997), 105. Quoted in Richard Bauckham, *Gospel Women: Studies of the Named Women in the Gospels* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 2002), 271-272.
- <sup>11</sup> 2 Kings 22: 14-20.
- <sup>12</sup> 1 Samuel 2: 1.
- <sup>13</sup> Luke 6:36
- <sup>14</sup> Matthew 5:7.
- <sup>15</sup> Matthew 18:33.
- <sup>16</sup> Matthew 9:13.
- <sup>17</sup> Amos 8:6
- <sup>18</sup> Luke 4:18.
- <sup>19</sup> Luke 6:20, 24.
- <sup>20</sup> Matthew 10:9-13.
- <sup>21</sup> Luke 11:3.
- <sup>22</sup> Micah 6:8.
- <sup>23</sup> Matthew 11:29.
- <sup>24</sup> Luke 14:11.

MARY OF NAZARETH

# Mary, Mother of God



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## Mary as Prophet by Penelope Duckworth

**Luke 1:39-56**

Mary set out and traveled to the hill country in haste to a town of Judah, where she entered the house of Zechariah and greeted Elizabeth. When Elizabeth heard Mary's greeting, the infant leaped in her womb, and Elizabeth, filled with the Holy Spirit, cried out in a loud voice and said, "Blessed are you among women, and blessed is the fruit of your womb. And how does this happen to me, that the mother of my Lord should come to me? For at the moment the sound of your greeting reached my ears, the infant in my womb leaped for joy. Blessed are you who believed that what was spoken to you by the Lord would be fulfilled." And Mary said:

My soul proclaims the greatness of the Lord;  
 my spirit rejoices in God my Savior  
 for he has looked with favor on his lowly servant.  
 From this day all generations will call me blessed:  
 the Almighty has done great things for me  
 and holy is his Name.  
 He has mercy on those who fear him  
 in every generation.  
 He has shown the strength of his arm,  
 and has scattered the proud in their conceit.  
 He has cast down the mighty from their thrones,  
 and has lifted up the lowly.  
 He has filled the hungry with good things,  
 and the rich he has sent away empty.  
 He has come to the help of his servant Israel  
 for he has remembered his promise of mercy,  
 the promise he made to our ancestors,  
 to Abraham and Sara and their children forever.

Mary remained with her about three months and then returned to her home.

In this visit of two pregnant women, one past childbearing years and the other very young, we hear prophetic speeches filled with energy. Elizabeth echoed the words of Deborah celebrating Jael, calling her in the Book of Judges<sup>2</sup> "most blessed of women." A portion of Elizabeth's words to Mary (along with those of the angel Gabriel) have resonated throughout history because they form the scriptural portion of the words of the traditional Rosary. They are prophetic words because Elizabeth had realized the significance of Mary's pregnancy before Mary told her. Mary's response is also prophetic... It is noteworthy that while Elizabeth's words praise Mary as a woman, Mary turns her words to the praise of God.

The Magnificat (so called because of the opening word in Latin), also called the Song

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of Mary, echoes the Old Testament words of Hannah<sup>3</sup> when she learned that she would conceive Samuel. It also resounds as a jubilant response, such as Judith gave when women blessed here.<sup>4</sup> And its words prefigure the words of the Beatitudes of Jesus. In the Magnificat Mary's voice joins many voices that challenged Israel, such as the prophets Habakkuk, Micah, Isaiah and Malachi. We also hear in it a refrain from the psalms, particularly Psalm 103, as well as in distant echoes of the Song of Miriam, Mary's namesake, with her joy in God's reversal of the Hebrew plight in Egypt.<sup>5</sup> It is in the spirit of the prophets of the Old Testament, and links their ancient hope with the beginning of its fulfillment.

In the Magnificat we see Mary, the Hebrew maiden living in occupied territory, well aware of the tensions between oppressor and oppressed. Her situation is socially precarious, and ostracism and rejection are real possibilities. She has gone to the home of an established and socially prominent relative. One might expect her to cower before potential criticism, but instead she throws back her head and sings her song, telling how her whole being delights in the will of God. While still a teenager, she enlarges the work of God, and is emboldened and impassioned in her love for God and for the honor God has bestowed on her. She has become an embodiment of the transforming work of God.

Her understanding of God draws from the rich sources of Hebrew prophecy and poetry, and as her song continues, it is the voice of a prophet, one of those who perceived and proclaimed the divine reality in their midst. Her song is rich in psychological and spiritual understanding. She understood that God desired mercy, and when it was not forthcoming, then through God's

action, the proud would be scattered in the imagination of their hearts. They would be confused and unable to conceive of themselves without their usual condition of control. Their confidence would be shattered, there would be a reversal of power, and the poor and lowly would be lifted up; they would find encouragement and support in the imagination of their hearts. She understood God's intent to bring salvation to Israel, and she speaks as the representative of the true Israel. This is indicated in the song when she switches from the first person singular, saying, "The mighty one has done great things for me," to the third person plural, in which she says, "His mercy is for those who fear him."

If we have not bestowed on Mary the title of prophet from God's announcement to her, then the Magnificat would be sufficient to give her that title, in that it fulfills the prophetic purpose as described by Walter Brueggemann in *The Prophetic Imagination*: "The task of prophetic ministry is to nurture, nourish, and evoke a consciousness and perception alternative to the consciousness and perception of the dominant culture around us."<sup>6</sup> Mary's song kindles anger at the status quo and hope for a new world to come. Although the Magnificat has been beautifully arranged for choral voices and sung repeatedly in daily offices, it remains a stark challenge to inequity and a call to faith for the dispossessed. . . .

The prophet gives language to the often silent voices of those who have a different hope, a different vision, a different dream of the future. The prophetic voice may concern a specific issue, a specific point in time, or it may address the ongoing and enduring situation of human frailty. We should

note that the idea of prophecy as prediction has almost disappeared from contemporary scholarship. When Mary delivers the Magnificat, she stands in the line of the prophets, the truth-speakers of Israel who were inspired by the Holy Spirit. It is they who deliver God's word to the people. They interpret history as revealing God's moral sovereignty. Mary's words harken back to Abraham and the promise God made to the patriarch that he would be a blessing.<sup>7</sup> Mary is also called blessed by Elizabeth, who claims that future generations will call her blessed. It is unlikely that the connection between Mary's experience and that of Abraham was lost on either woman. But most important, Mary delivered God's word not only in the words she spoke but also in her physical delivery of the Christ child, who is called the Word incarnate.

It is significant that while Christianity has been reluctant to name Mary as a prophet, Islam places her closer to that calling. A prophet in Islam is not only someone who speaks God's words but also one to whom God speaks and who listens. Mary (or Maryam) is the only woman named in the Qur'an, and she is greatly esteemed in that religious tradition. . . . Although Mary is not officially named a prophet in Islam, she is accorded the status of infallibility, a status reserved for prophets, meaning she can err but not sin.

Though the Magnificat is a hymn and a poem, it is foremost prophecy. Rubem A. Alves says the prophet is one who stands empty before the spirit of God. He or she speaks, invoking the holy one, and proclaiming that which will renew the hopes of the dead and challenge the deadness in the living. Prophecy is the place where the artist and the theologian intersect.<sup>8</sup> Seeking ultimate truth and at the same

time seeking to utter the divine mystery require that one exercise both the active and the contemplative life. One who would speak prophetically must be not only honest about what is, but also faithful to the source of ultimate reality and willing to suffer to enable the message and methods of that ultimate reality to transform the confusions and contradictions of the times. Speaking truth to power is the work of the prophet, and it is work that continues to shape history. It is neither a popular nor a profitable vocation. Faith-based activism for justice always struggles against the status quo, urging people to alertness to the inequities of the time. Down through the ages, people have found their voices to speak out despite fear, oppression, disapproval, and even official silencing. The realization of God's reign on earth requires that truth continue to be spoken despite the costs.

The idea of a woman prophet was not a foreign one to the Hebrews, even though a woman was not officially allowed to bear witness. Moses' sister Miriam had been known as a prophet, and her words are retold in Exodus.<sup>9</sup> It is noteworthy that a prophetic dream before the birth of her brother Moses was attributed to Miriam, who was Mary's namesake. When Miriam reported her dream, her parents did not believe her. The story is told in Jewish writings from the New Testament period.<sup>10</sup> Similarly, Joseph did not believe Mary's story of the Annunciation.

Another prophet, Huldah, is chronicled in the Second Book of Kings,<sup>11</sup> which tells how she wisely perceived the veracity of a scroll of scripture for King Josiah. Deborah, also named a prophet, served as a judge of Israel. The Book of Judges tells how she called Barak to lead the people of Israel to victory

over the Canaanites and especially the Canaanites' general, Sisera. Barak held Deborah in such esteem that he refused to go into battle unless she went with him. As it turned out, the Israelites defeated the Canaanite army, but Sisera escaped and went to the politically neutral tent of Heber the Kenite. Heber's wife, Jael, met Sisera and invited the general inside. She gave him food and invited him to rest, but as he slept, she killed him by driving a tent peg into his temple. Following Sisera's death the Israelites destroyed the king of the Canaanites and were free from their oppression for the next forty years.

Scripture records the Song of Deborah, a celebratory account of the deeds of the Israelite army and a paean to Jael, whom she hailed as "most blessed of women" (A phrase closely repeated in Elizabeth's greeting to Mary). Her song is one of the earliest and most important examples of Hebrew poetry....

Despite its literary effectiveness the bellicosity in the Song of Deborah, as well as the triumphalism, ...are troubling to most modern sensibilities. The words of the Magnificat have also been viewed as warlike by some, but while God's actions that have "scattered the proud in the thoughts of their hearts," "brought down the powerful from their thrones," and "sent the rich away empty" do imply a clear reversal of the social and political order, they do not necessarily celebrate violence. In this sense the Magnificat differs from the Song of Miriam, which is jubilant over the defeat and death of the Egyptians; the Song of Deborah, which rejoices over the death of Sisera; and even the prayer of Hannah, which says, "My mouth derides my enemies, because I rejoice in my victory."<sup>12</sup>

Mary clearly takes inspiration from the women who preceded her, but her song is a new song.... The themes in the

Magnificat echo those of the Hebrew prophets, but Mary has composed a unique song, three of whose prophetic themes stand out clearly and are more fully developed in her son. It is interesting to imagine the way in which those themes were inculcated from mother to child. First, she emphasized the mercy of God, the only noun she used twice, and Jesus made mercy a fundamental tenet of his gospel. Not only did he ask mercy of his followers, saying, "Be merciful, just as your father is merciful"<sup>13</sup> and "Blessed are the merciful, for they will receive mercy,"<sup>14</sup> but he responded to and healed those who asked him to have mercy. He taught mercy in the parable of the unforgiving servant,<sup>15</sup> and his understanding of mercy was clearly based in his relationship with God. This was shown in his response to those who questioned his disciples about Jesus eating with tax collectors and sinners when he quoted the prophet Hosea, "Go and learn what this means, 'I desire mercy, not sacrifice.'"<sup>16</sup>

Second, Mary aligned herself with the poor, and understood God as the God of the poor. Her understanding is that God has "filled the hungry with good things and sent the rich away empty." She stands in line with the prophet Amos, who railed against those who were "buying the poor for silver and the needy for a pair of sandals."<sup>17</sup> Similarly, when Jesus began his ministry in Nazareth by reading from the prophet Isaiah, he chose the passage that said, "The Spirit of the Lord is upon me, because he has anointed me to bring good news to the poor."<sup>18</sup> In the Beatitudes Jesus contrasted the poor and the rich, as Mary had done: "Blessed are you who are poor, for yours is the kingdom of God.... But woe to you who are rich, for you have received your consolations"

MARY OF NAZARETH

# Mary, Mother of God



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The Keepers of Love

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## The Wisdom of Older Women

From *Mary: The Imagination of her Heart* by Penelope Duckworth (pp. 25-28)  
*Reprinted with permission*

We are told that Mary stayed with Elizabeth for three months, which was the first trimester of her pregnancy, the time of morning sickness, nausea, possible miscarriage, and weariness. It is when a woman's body adjusts to her pregnancy and, in a sense, assents to its demands. Perhaps Mary needed to be with Elizabeth during that time so that her full physical assent would be supported in the first difficult months. And Elizabeth was in her last trimester, often the most physically trying part of a pregnancy, and she was not a young woman. It is likely that her body ached from bearing the growing weight, and a helpful young companion would have been welcome.

We may assume that Mary stayed until Elizabeth delivered her child. She probably helped with the housework and cared for the infant John the Baptist as Elizabeth regained her strength. She saw what childbirth was like and learned something of mothering an infant. These were probably happy and hopeful times. Neither woman could see what would lie ahead—John's head on a platter borne by a dancing girl and Jesus nailed to a crossbar in agony and disgrace. Nor could they see that future tomb, which would become a womb for unimagined new life. All they could see was their inclusion in the beginning of God's work.

However, Elizabeth's was not the only prophetic voice that Mary encountered. In the Gospel of Luke, when Mary went to the temple to give the offering prescribed in Leviticus, she met with Simeon, who spoke of the destiny of the child and of Mary. His words were a mix of affirmation and warning. He spoke of the child as the awaited savior, but he also warned Mary that a sword would cause her grievous pain. But in addition to Simeon, another prophet—a woman—was there:

There was also a prophet, Anna, the daughter of Phanuel, of the tribe of Asher. She was of a great age, having lived with her husband seven years after her marriage, then as a widow to the age of eighty-four. She never left the temple but worshiped there with fasting and prayer night and day. At that moment she came and began to praise God and to speak about the child to all who were looking for the redemption of Israel (Lk 2: 36-38).

Anna's heritage as a member of the tribe of Asher is interesting because she represents the northern tribes and exiles. Her tribe lived on the west coast of the Galilean highlands, which had close contact with the maritime city of Tyre and so was seen as having a half-caste standing. Hers was the tribe that sprang from the



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eighth son of Jacob by Leah's maid, Zilpah. Consequently, of the twelve tribes, it was among those with a lower status. As a member of this tribe, Anna knew lack of social influence; as a woman she knew vulnerability; as a widow

she knew loss; and as a prophet she knew God. Her presence at the temple demonstrates that Jesus came to fulfill the messianic hopes of all the tribes of Israel, even the most remote and far flung.\*

Her life as an elderly widow who never left the temple is clarified if we recall that after menopause she would no longer be deemed ritually unclean. And her continuous worship is better understood if we remember the expressed desire at the conclusion of the Twenty-third Psalm, which Isaac Watts paraphrased beautifully: "Oh, may thy house be mine abode and all my works be praise. There would I find a settled rest, while others go and come; no more a stranger or a guest, but like a child at home."\*

It is important to note that Anna was the very first person to see and proclaim Jesus as the Messiah. She announced to all who were awaiting the liberation of Israel that the deliverer had come. She must have seen in Jesus' tiny face something extraordinary. She must have recognized in him some understanding of vulnerability and loss as well as the news of a triumph that comes of and through it. Unfortunately, the gospels do not record what she said. All we know is that she was present and aware of what was happening. But if we assume that each significant encounter we have influences who we become, then we may assume that Mary's encounter with another woman who was reputed to stand in the line of

the prophets shaped the woman she was becoming as well as the man Jesus became. We know Anna was an older woman, like Mary's cousin Elizabeth. Whereas Elizabeth speaks in the gospel, Anna does not. But prophets do speak; that in part is what makes them prophets.

Anna's reputation as a prophet remains despite the scriptural silence. Mary, on closer study, is clearly shown to carry the legacy and moral force of the prophets, even if the title has not been applied to her. It is time that changed. Not only did God announce the divine will to her but she courageously embraced a future that would scandalize the status quo. In addition, she found her own voice to proclaim God's will and its broader implications, and her words have encouraged and emboldened those who recite them through the ages. Her example surely has encouraged others from the church's beginnings, such as the four daughters of Philip the Evangelist, who were known as prophets (Acts 21:9). In the Magnificat we hear a young woman touch the locus of her power, adding a new and distinct link in the chain of songs of triumph that her foremothers sang, and prefiguring ideas that would find their fullest expression in the Sermon on the Mount and in Jesus himself. The power she unleashes in the song bears fruit in Christ's power to heal, overturn, and resurrect.

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senseless violence transform into the compassion and courage needed to stand in solidarity with the oppressed to bring meaningful change to cultures, systems and structures which perpetuate inequity and injustice. We pray...

Please add to or adjust these petitions as you would like. You can also open up the prayers of the faithful to the community.

### Sign of Peace and Restoration

Leader: Today, offer those around you a sign of peace and the healing and restoration of gifts lost or forgotten. Trace the sign of the cross on their forehead and say, "Peace be with you. May the fullness of your giftedness come forth.

### Closing Prayer

Leader: In the Gospel for today's celebration, Jesus reminds us that the miracle of his creation is not located in birth, but in belief. Mary, a lowly, disenfranchised woman from an unknown town, responded faithfully and prophetically to God at work in her life. To Mary, our sister on the journey we remember and sing/say:

Leader: Mary of Nazareth, Jewish mother of Jesus,  
All: Make us hearers and bearers of the Word

Leader: Mary of Nazareth, Icon of She Who Is,  
All: Enable us to be heavy with God

Leader: Mary of Nazareth, dangerous bearer of truth and integrity,  
All: Show us God in you and in ourselves

Leader: Mary of Nazareth, Magnificat Mother of the One Who Saves,  
All: Open us to you and to the world

Leader: Mary of Nazareth, liberating and protecting sister,  
All: Keep us company in our struggles to be who God created us to be

Leader: Mary of Nazareth, partner with God in the work of redemption,  
All: Walk with us as we journey to join you in the Communion of Saints

Leader: May we remember her example as we discern the opportunities we have to love, for "blessed are those who hear the word of God and observe it."

All: Amen

Closing Song: Recommended – Canticle of the Turning

### Readings from Sacred Texts:

From the Qur'an (suggestion 3:45-48) :



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# Mary, Mother of God

## Prayer Service Celebrating Mary as Sister, Companion, Leader, Disciple and Prophet on the Solemnity of Mary, the Holy Mother of God

### Welcome/Greeting:

Leader: Today we invite you to welcome Mary into your hearts in a new way, to imagine her anew, beyond her important role as mother and as virgin, to prayerfully consider her meaning as sister, companion, disciple, leader and prophet on the journey.

### Opening Song: (Suggestion) Pilgrim Prayer by Pia Moriarty.

You can find it sung here: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=EujrWbEir-U>

### Call to Prayer:

Leader: In every generation, women have and continue to faithfully and generously respond to the call to serve God and God's holy people.

They have been apostles and disciples, prophets and leaders, deacons, theologians, preachers, educators, counselors, musicians, artists, writers, comforters, pastoral ministers, chaplains and yes, priestly people offering their gifts to the Body of Christ.

They have raised their voices to reclaim Mary of Nazareth from male-defined symbolism that has served to short-circuit women's own quest for wholeness.

They have re-interpreted Mary's imagery in light of their own struggle to be independent, strong, fully engaged and holy people.

All: Today, we women and men, sisters and brothers, grandmothers and grandfathers, aunts and uncles, mothers and fathers, godparents – members of the Body of Christ – know our Church suffers a poverty of spirit brought about by the exclusion of women from full participation in the life, ministry, and leadership of the church.

We gather together as one family to pray and work for a Church that is truly inclusive and alive with the gifts, spirit and potential of all its members. We gather in solidarity with the women of today whose demands for justice and inclusion call us to conversion.

We gather in hope for the women and men of the next generation, that they may know a world where fierce and loving partnerships of the heart overcome every prejudice, every obstacle that keeps God's outrageous love from flowing through and to all her people.

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## Opening Prayer:

Leader: Good and Loving God, Creator of women and men in your own image, we turn to you in trust, knowing you will give us all that we need to make your dream for humankind and the earth a reality.

Create in us a desire for the wholeness you planned, empower us to hear and speak your redeeming truth, guide us in your work of challenging unjust structures that subordinate women and blind us to their full potential, sustain us when the work seems futile and the path is dark,

Healer of the brokenhearted and Giver of light, teach us to lovingly restore in each other the gifts and potential that has been lost or discarded along the path of ignorance and fear, so that your light and love might shine more brightly through and in each one of us.

All: Amen.

## First Reading:

A reading from the book of Elizabeth Johnson, CSJ

Around the world, large numbers of women are slipping the bonds of male control and seeking instead a partnership that honors the equal human dignity befitting themselves as human persons. This liberating movement...a sign of our times...brings new voices to the table.

When it comes to the symbolism of Mary, the Marian tradition has functioned negatively to promote an idealized notion of the obedient female self, a construal that legitimates women's subordinate place in the church.

Yet, it is also true that her symbolism holds a subversive power. The living remembrance of Mary inspires the struggle for God's compassionate and liberating justice. Women in situations of dire suffering caused by the injustice of poverty, racial and ethnic prejudice, and violence, consistently find connections to the biblical story of Miriam of Nazareth who was also a poor woman -- "someone like us."

(From Truly Our Sister, xiv)

Silence (about one minute)

## Second Reading:

A reading from the words of Agbonkhianmeghe Orabator, SJ

Discrimination against women within the Catholic community is so manifest, that the church totters on the brink of compromising its self-identity as the basic sacrament of salvation.

I feel almost violated because I feel that my humanity, which should be full and complete on the basis of mutuality and equality, is not being given that opportunity to have that experience of completeness.

We stand before God, as Cain was, befuddled by a question that we simply cannot wish away at the wave

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of a magisterial wand.

The question is: Church, where is your sister? Church, where is your mother?

Something in me simply refuses to accept that on the basis of some category we have created we can then determine who is in, who is out; who belongs and who doesn't belong. I ask, why this duality? Why this tired system where people are placed on different levels, and sometimes it's down to gender? Why? I cannot live with that duality. Something in me revolts.

Humanity is not about one side. It is about both. It is man. It is woman. It is male. It is female. It is all together.

(December 19, 2016, National Catholic Reporter)

Silence (about one minute)

Gospel: Luke 11:27-28

While Jesus was speaking, a woman from the crowd called out and said to him, "blessed is the womb that carried you and the breasts at which you nursed." He replied, "Rather, blessed are those who hear the word of God and observe it."

**Reflections:** Invite participants to share the ways that Mary's leadership, discipleship, sisterhood and prophetic voice resonates in the invitations God has offered them and in the profound suffering present in the world around them.

**Prayers of the Faithful**

Nurturing Creator, you plant in us the seeds of awareness and consciousness of the dignity of all your children. Just as you asked Mary, you ask us to offer our lives in love of neighbor and of you. Console us in our fear, God, and help us to trust that, alongside our awareness of injustice, you have bestowed, also, the grace and the courage needed to direct our lives towards the justice of your reign. We pray...

Loving God, you invited Mary, a poor Jewish woman in an oppressed society, to recognize her own ability, her own goodness, her own worthiness in the face of a culture that diminished and punished women who stepped outside the norms. Her memory is a dangerous and subversive one because she bore Your vision of radical freedom and dignity in her body -- speaking up and out for her people. God, so many in our world are silenced, exploited, and ignored -- within structures that breed injustice. Embolden us to lift our voices, to amplify the needs, gifts, and dignity of our marginalized neighbors. Give us the courage to fiercely speak truth to power, as Mary did, having recognized the good and worthy in us and in one another. We pray...

Compassionate Healer, we ask that you heal both those who are the victims of sexism, racism, militarism, and materialism and those who perpetrate those sins. Help us to understand we are one Body. Open our hearts to the suffering around us and let the river of justice flow through families and communities where women are violated, Muslims are taunted, children are exploited, and gay and black bodies are murdered. Bless and heal the families and communities of victims of gun violence, sex trafficking, domestic violence, homophobia, xenophobia and religious intolerance in all its forms. May righteous indignation towards the

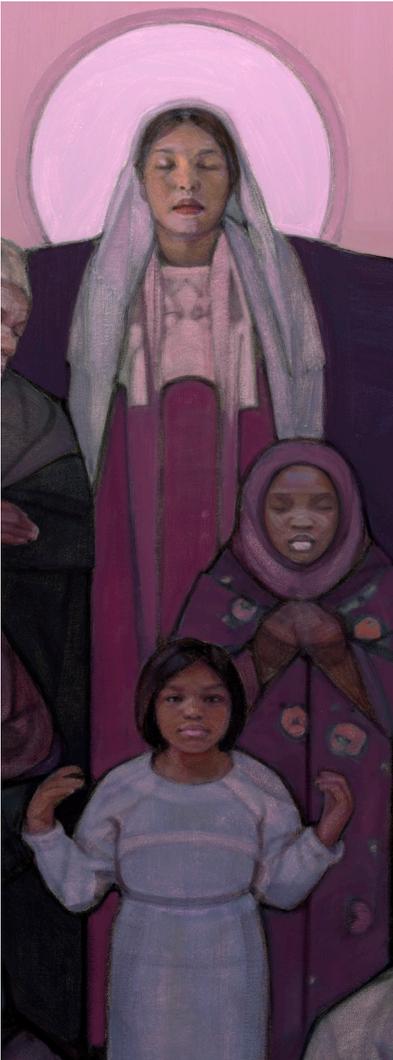
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MARY OF NAZARETH

# Mary, Mother of God



FutureChurch



Mary-Mother of Mercy copyright 2015 Janet McKenzie [www.janetmckenzie.com](http://www.janetmckenzie.com)

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## Reflection and Discussion Questions Mary in the Age of Complementarity

1. Begin your reflection or discussion by considering what images or symbols of Mary have been most important in your life. As a child. As an adult.
  - a. How did you relate to those images? Did they comfort or afflict? Did they empower or disenfranchise?
  - b. Which prayers were more important growing up and as an adult, the Our Father or the Hail Mary? Why?
  
2. According to Elizabeth Johnson, official views of Mary have been shaped by men in a patriarchal church and have functioned powerfully to define and control female lives. Women were never consulted, nor were they permitted to bring their knowledge of their own lives before God into this official portrait. Almost inevitably the Marian symbol became that of an idealized woman, created as an act of men's definition of women, whose voices were officially silenced. Strong emphasis on Mary's obedience, virginity, and primary importance as a mother shaped a religious symbol that satisfied the psyche and need of churchmen more adequately than it served women's spiritual and social needs.
  - a. To what extent do you think Johnson's assessment is true?
  - b. What experiences can you share to illustrate your response?
  
3. Johnson also points out throughout time, women and men have appropriated Mary according to their own needs and times. For most of our history, Mary has been the only female figure allowed in or near the sanctuary. She worked subversively to denote female power and possibility. In popular traditions too, women have found in prayer and companionship with her a source of inspiration, comfort, solidarity, and strength - precisely as a woman and particularly in times of trial.
  - a. When have you experienced Mary to be a subversive symbol? When have you known her to be a companion or a source of strength?
  
4. If you had the power to create and shape Mary's image for today, what would she look like? What characteristics would she have? What would she care about? What would she inspire in you and in others?

(Text used for this guide: *Truly Our Sister* by Elizabeth A. Johnson, CSJ. New York: Continuum Publishing Company (2003).