

MARY OF NAZARETH



Mary in the Early Church



FutureChurch

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Mary Christine Athans, BVM, Ph.D.

Mary – the Jewish maiden! Mary – Queen of heaven! – Mary – Our Lady of Guadalupe! Theologian George Tavard appropriately titled his book The Thousand Faces of Mary.¹ Mary was a real human being, born in space and time. However, images of her have evolved over the centuries as various societies have adopted her. These depictions reflect an understanding of her in each culture. We begin this project by offering an overview – more or less a tapestry background – of the history, theology and devotion that has developed regarding our understanding of Mary over the centuries. How did she grow from a Jewish maiden to the queen of the universe?

Part I: From the Early Church Through the Renaissance and Reformation

The Early Church

With the second generation of believers after the death of Jesus, questions arose regarding his lineage, his early years, and his mother. As the number of eye witnesses to Jesus and his disciples diminished, members of the early Christian communities knew that the oral tradition would be dwindling, so they began to write down their reflections about Jesus, usually from the vantage point of a particular group or community. The four canonical Gospels were most likely written in the last third of the first century. The infancy narratives in Matthew and Luke, many scholars believe, were developed in the latter part of the writing process to enhance the stories of Jesus' birth and to

support claims that he was the Messiah. Quotations of the Hebrew prophets regarding the longed-for savior were incorporated into the infancy narratives because the authors believed these would support their claims.

In addition to the canonical Gospels (Matthew, Mark, Luke and John), which claimed apostolic origin and were finally authenticated by the church in the fourth century, another form of literature arose in which stories of the lineage and life of Jesus were embellished far beyond what could be claimed as rooted in the beliefs of the early church. These *apocrypha* (i.e. manuscripts which were secret, hidden away, obscure, and of dubious authenticity,

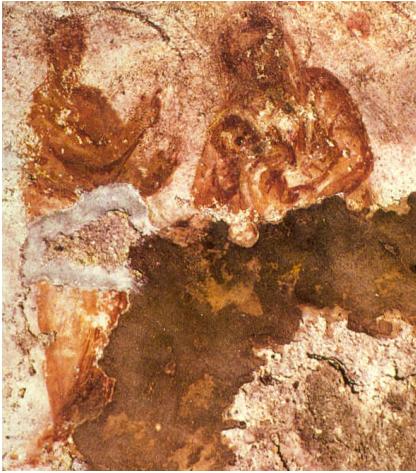


Image of Mary, mother of Jesus, in the Catacomb of Priscilla in Rome. It depicts her nursing the Infant Jesus. The figure at the left appears to be the prophet Balaam pointing to a star (outside the frame). Dated to the early Third Century C.E., this is perhaps the earliest known image of Mary and the Infant Jesus. Due to Jewish influence on the early Christian communities and periodic persecutions of Christians, images of Mary are exceedingly rare before the Edict of Milan in 313.

not canonical),² often provided imaginative accounts of the lives of Jesus and Mary. Some of these documents written in the second and third centuries, although not canonical, influenced the tradition of the church.

Best known among these writings regarding Mary is the *Protoevangelium of James*. Although this book claims to be written by James, the brother of Jesus who died c. 62 C.E., scholars agree that it was written sometime in the mid-to-late second century. It was known to several of the Fathers of the Church such as Justin, Clement of Alexandria and Origen.³ This “proto-gospel,” which is a highly imaginative account of Mary’s life, names her parents as Anna and Joachim and describes how this elderly couple became pregnant with their only child. It elaborates on Mary’s childhood at home and the story that, at the age of three, Joachim and Anna took her to the Temple:

And the priest took her and kissed her and blessed her, saying, “The Lord has magnified your name among all generations; because of you the Lord at the end of days will manifest his redemption to the children of Israel. And he placed her on the third step of the altar, and the Lord God put grace upon the child, and she danced for joy with her feet, and the whole house of Israel loved her.”⁴

When Mary reached puberty and could no longer reside in the Temple, an elaborate process was established whereby the elderly widower Joseph, who had children by a previous marriage, was designated to be her husband and care for the virgin Mary.

In the *Protoevangelium of James*, the story of the Annunciation is comprised of two parts: first, Mary hears a voice at the well, later an angel later appears to her at home. When Joseph discovers Mary’s pregnancy, he feels betrayed and angry and weeps, as does Mary. When

both claim that they have not had intercourse, the high priest puts them to a test which they pass. Shortly after that, en route to Bethlehem, Mary gives birth to Jesus.

The virginity of Mary before, during, and after the birth of Jesus is described graphically in the *Protoevangelium* by the Hebrew midwife and another Hebrew woman named Salome, who is doubtful that Mary could still be a virgin. After Salome examines Mary physically following the birth of Jesus, her hand is consumed by fire. An angel appears who directs Salome to touch the child Jesus. Her hand is immediately restored.⁵ These amazing stories became part of a Marian mythology that contributed to conviction regarding the virgin birth.

The Catholic Church found in the *Protoevangelium of James* elements which it built into its tradition, such as the names of Mary’s parents, Joachim and Anne. While the Church did not rely on the so-called “proof” of Mary’s virginity as portrayed in the *Protevangelium*, theologians continued the discussion of Mary’s virginity before, during and after the birth of Jesus for years to come. *The Protevangelium* was likely a catalyst for that theological reflection.

The Virginity of Mary and the Virgin Birth

Theologians of the Patristic Era (approximately the second to the seventh centuries), however, had little to proclaim about Mary from a theological perspective. Their focus was Christology, not Mariology. Mary was considered noteworthy only as the mother of Jesus. Extraordinary births to women who had not conceived until their elderly years, such as Sarah and Hannah, were considered “miraculous,” as were the conceptions of quasi-divine figures in Greek and Roman mythology in that era. Therefore, searching for an

explanation for the conception of Jesus as described in the infancy narratives was not unlikely for those hoping to discover more about his origin.

In the world of Middle-Platonic philosophical discourse, the spiritual element of life was deemed superior, and that which was material, especially the sexual, was considered inferior. Therefore, Jesus could not be tainted by having been born of sexual intercourse. It seemed essential to many patristic theologians that Mary was a perpetual virgin.

Mary in Early Christian Art

Because the first Christians were Jews, they would have shared the belief that any depiction of the divine or the holy was forbidden according to the first commandment. In addition, they would have rejected cults and probably feared that undue attention to Mary might evoke a suspicion of goddess worship.⁶ Therefore, it was not until the migration of Christianity to Greece and Rome that one might expect that pictures of Jesus or Mary would emerge. Because Christianity was undergoing persecution at least periodically until the Edict of Milan in 313, artistic depictions of Mary in that era were unlikely.

George H. Tavard, in *The Thousand Faces of the Virgin Mary*, claims “There are no traces of pictures of Christ and of his mother in the first two or three centuries of Christianity. The frescos and mosaics in the catacombs date back mostly to the late third and fourth century, when the peace of Constantine lifted all obstacles to the possibility of elaborate decorations of the Christian cemeteries.”⁷ The catacombs became the sites for honoring Christian martyrs. Because Mary was not a martyr, however, she does not seem to have been a subject for prayer and veneration. Archeologists and artists, as well as theologians, continue to search

for images of Mary from the earliest times. The women in the frescos in the catacombs are all clothed in the garb of Romans of the day. Mary, as a Jewish woman, does not appear to be among the images.

Goddess Imagery

To what degree did pagan goddess art influence the developing iconography of Mary? As Christianity moved into the Greco-Roman world and Mary received more attention due to discussion of her at the councils, comparisons were made to the goddesses of ancient civilizations popular at the time. Icons of Mary, with Jesus sitting in front of her facing forward, were reminiscent for many Mediterranean Christians of the Egyptian goddess Isis with her son Horus sitting on her lap. Isis, known as “the Mother of the God,” was considered a mediator, one with healing power who nurtured and healed others.

The Greek goddess Artemis/Diana, whose temple at Ephesus was one of the seven wonders of the ancient world, was acclaimed as the ultimate virgin goddess. The Acts of the Apostles states that the silversmiths in Ephesus, who made silver statues of Artemis, believed that Paul’s preaching would cause their business to disappear. They instigated a riot in which they cried “Great is Artemis of the Ephesians!” (Acts 19: 28, 34) Almost four hundred years later, when Mary was declared *Theotokos* (Mother of God) at the Council of Ephesus, the crowds cried out similarly “Praise be to the Theotokos!”

Scholars will continue to debate the degree to which images of Mary were influenced by the goddess imagery of the time. Mary’s integral role in the theology of the church grew considerably after the Council of Ephesus (431 C.E.). As the church defined its beliefs in Greek philosophical language, it

also adapted its art to the style of the Greco-Roman world. When Mary was acclaimed *Theotokos*, her image needed to be worthy of the title “bearer of God.” An imperial figure of Mary emerged with some of the aspects of a goddess. Although elements of devotion to Isis and Artemis appear to have impacted some artists in their representations of Mary, today Isis and Artemis are studied primarily as figures in history and art. On the other hand, veneration of Mary is alive and well in the twenty-first century.

Prayer to Mary

Prayer to Mary does not seem to have been common in the early patristic era. Most scholars agree that the oldest prayer to Mary extant is the *Sub tuum praesidum confugimus sancta Dei genitrix*, possibly from third or fourth century Egypt. The papyrus fragment with this text written in Greek was discovered in Egypt in 1938 and is the earliest known version of this prayer. The inscription reads: “Under your mercy we take refuge, *Theotokos*. Do not overlook our petitions in adversity but rescue us from danger, uniquely holy one and uniquely blessed one.”⁸ As years passed the prayer expanded; one translation is: “We seek refuge under the protection of your mercies, oh Mother of God; do not reject our supplication in need but save us from perdition, oh you who alone are blessed.”⁹ Pre-Vatican II Catholics may remember this prayer as, “We fly to your protection, O holy Mother of God. Despise not our petitions and our necessities...”

The belief that prayer to Mary did not exist before the development of a cult to Mary following the Council of Ephesus, however, is questioned by scholars today.¹⁰

Mary and the Early Ecumenical Councils

Mary does not receive theological

attention until the great ecumenical councils, and then not primarily for herself. The theological disputes were centered on Christ. After Constantine summoned the Council of Nicaea (325 C.E.), Mary’s role came under new scrutiny. This focus was partly due to an early christological heresy named docetism (derived from the Greek word meaning “to seem”), which claimed that Jesus did not have a human body. Docetists believed that Jesus’ “body” was only a mirage to contain the divine. This heresy was a major challenge to belief in the Incarnation. Was Jesus really human? The Apostles Creed, undated and not of apostolic origin, was based on an Old Roman Creed which stated that Jesus was born of the virgin Mary (*ex Maria virgine*). The Nicene Creed affirmed only that “....he came down, was made flesh, and became man...”

The Council of Constantinople (381 C.E.), which defined the role of the Holy Spirit, produced the Niceno-Constantinopolitan Creed which is professed at the Eucharist in Catholic Churches on Sundays and special feasts. It says in part that “he came down from heaven, was made flesh by the Holy Spirit of the Virgin Mary, and became man; and he was crucified for our sake under Pontius Pilate, suffered and was buried.”¹¹ All of the elements mentioned in this creed -- being born, crucified, buried – emphasized that Jesus had human flesh. Although the relationship of the divine to the human in Jesus continued to be a contentious theological issue until the Council of Chalcedon (451 C.E.), and even later, the ecumenical councils consistently affirmed that Jesus had a human body born from Mary’s body.

The question then became – was Mary only the mother of the humanity of Jesus? – or was she truly the mother of God? Cyril, bishop of Alexandria, believed ardently that Mary should

be named Theotokos (God-bearer). Nestorius, the Patriarch of Constantinople, was preaching that Mary was Christotokos (Christ-bearer), which implied that she was only the mother of the humanity of Jesus, and not Theotokos. Cyril convinced Pope Celestine to request the Emperor Theodosius II to summon a council to discuss Nestorius' teaching and make decrees accordingly. The emperor finally issued a call for a council to open in Ephesus on Pentecost in 431 C.E. 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.

Evidence suggests that the common folk of Ephesus in their affection for Mary lobbied for her to be declared *Theotokos*. Ephesus was one of the largest commercial and cultural centers in the Roman world. Its local populace became an important factor in this otherwise theological dispute. Crowds

assembled and demonstrated during the council shouting that Mary should be named *Theotokos* affirming the position of Cyril of Alexandria.

Eventually, the council declared Nestorius a heretic and he was excommunicated. Although the council never explicitly declared Mary *Theotokos*, Cyril's position was vindicated.¹² The assembled crowds roaming the streets were jubilant. At the end of the final session, they accompanied the bishops to their lodgings carrying lighted torches and shouting "Praised be the Theotokos! Long live Cyril!"¹³ Tavard states, "From this point on it was a feature of the central Christian tradition that Mary's virginity and holiness are inseparably tied to the incarnation of the Logos."¹⁴ Mary, as an ordinary Jewish woman who had accepted God's invitation to be the mother of Jesus, seemed to have vanished.

Although scholars differ regarding

an origin for the development of a Marian cult, a "grass roots" movement, supported by many in the imperial court, led not only to exalting Mary as *Theotokos*, but to enthusiasm regarding Mary herself as an imperial figure displayed in icons still common in Christian art. Mary was depicted as an empress in imperial robes. Icons of the patristic era portray Mary decked in fine garb, holding the man-God, a child-king in her lap, presiding over heaven and earth. The title *Theotokos* is still cherished by those in the Orthodox churches of the East where she is also known lovingly as *Aeiparthenos* (Ever Virgin), *Panagia* (All-Holy), and *Archrantos* (Immaculate). Although these titles have never been defined explicitly in an ecumenical council of the Eastern Orthodox Churches, they are used frequently in liturgy and personal prayer.¹⁵

Mary in the Early Church

Mary Christine Athans, BVM, draws on the latest historical research, the fruits of post-Vatican II Jewish-Christian dialogue, the insights of feminist theology, and contemporary spiritual reflection to rediscover the Jewish Mary: a woman of enormous courage, strength, and prayer. In restoring Mary to her own time and place, she helps us rediscover Mary's message for our own time.


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¹George Tavard, *The Thousand Faces of Mary* (Collegeville, MN: Liturgical Press, 1996).

²Webster's Ninth New Collegiate Dictionary (Springfield, MA: Merriam-Webster, 1983).

³Beverly Roberts Gaventa, *Mary: Glimpses of the Mother of Jesus* (Minneapolis: Fortress, 1999). See pp.106-107 for a discussion of the origin of the document. The entire text of the *Protoevangelium of James* is in the Appendix, 133-145.

⁴*Protoevangelium*, 7:2-3 in Gaventa, *Glimpses*, 136.

⁵*Protoevangelium*, 19:1-20:3 in Gaventa, *Glimpses*, 141-143.

⁶Tina Beattie, "Mary in Patristic Theology," in *Mary: The Complete Resource*, ed. Sara Jane Boss (London: Continuum, 2007), 75-105.

⁷Tavard, 65.

⁸Richard Price, "Theotokos: The Title and its Significance in Doctrine and Devotion," in *Mary: The Complete Resource*, ed. Sarah Jane Boss (New York: Continuum, 2008), 56-73. Price cites the John Rylands

Papyrus 470 restoration by Giambernardini 1975: 72-4.

⁹Marina Warner, *Alone of All Her Sex: The Myth and Cult of the Virgin Mary* (New York: Vintage, 1983).

¹⁰Stephen J. Shoemaker, "Marian Liturgies and Devotions in Early Christianity," in *Mary: The Complete Resource*, ed. Boss, 130-148.

¹¹Heinrich Denziger and John F. Clarkson, eds., *The Church Teaches: Documents of the Church in English Translation* (St. Louis: B. Herder, 1955).

¹²Price, 93.

¹³Hilda Graef, *Mary: A History of Doctrine and Devotion*, combined ed. (Notre Dame, IN: Ave Maria Press, 2009).

¹⁴W.H.C. Freund, *The Early Church* (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1965), 217.

¹⁵Kyriaki Karidoyanes Fitzgerald, "Mary the Theotokos and the Call to Holiness," in *Mary, Mother of God*, ed. Carl E. Braaten and Robert W. Jenson (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 2004), 80-99.

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Mary in the Middle Ages



A statue of Mary with the child Jesus adorns the west portal (Portal of the Virgin) of Notre-Dame de Paris, France, perhaps the most famous of the many cathedrals built in Mary's honor in Middle Ages. The portal was completed by the mid 1220s.

Mary in the Middle Ages by Mary Christine Athans, BVM, Ph.D.

In the Middle Ages – from the sixth to the sixteenth century – Christianity became immersed in a feudal world of lords and vassals. The code of chivalry portrayed “the lady” as a woman on a pedestal who was worshipped from afar. In time, Mary was transformed into “Our Lady” – *Notre Dame*. She became the lady *par excellence* of the feudal era.

Cathedrals and shrines were erected in her honor. Three times a day bells rang over cities, towns and fields. Lords and peasants alike paused to recite the *Angelus*: “The angel of the Lord declared unto Mary, and she conceived of the Holy Spirit.” The *Memorare* prayer seeking Mary’s aid – attributed to Bernard of Clairvaux – and the rosary – “the poor man’s psalter” for the illiterate – became common prayers. Christians petitioned Mary for good crops, health, wealth, a husband or safety in childbirth. People fervently believed that Mary was their patroness and protector.

Devotionalism abounded. Litanies to Mary were created. Hymns were composed. Passion plays captured the imagination of illiterate people. The medieval antiphons – the *Salve Regina* and the *Alma Redemptoris Mater* – which emerged in the eleventh century – plead for Mary’s assistance to gain God’s mercy. During that same period the cult of the *Mater Dolorosa* (Sorrowful Mother) grew in western Europe. Jacopone de Todi (c. 1230-1303) wrote some of the most poignant vernacular poems about Mary

in Italian. According to Marina Warner, his hymn on the sorrows of Mary, *Donna del Paradiso* (Lady of Paradise), “gave unique voice to her suffering in the Easter tradition.”¹ When Mary meets Jesus on the road to Calvary he speaks to her in his pain: “Mama, why have you come? You cause me a mortal wound, for your weeping pierces me and seems to me the sharpest sword.” Part of her anguished response is, “Son of the laughing face, why has the world so despised thee?”²

In time, Mary was transformed into “our Lady” – *Notre Dame*. She became the lady *par excellence* of the feudal era.

At a time when infant mortality rates were high, sons were killed in the Crusades, and disease was rampant, women could identify with Mary as the suffering mother. Men, too, might have sought the solace of Mary as mother when the image of God seemed so distant. Typical in the medieval period was the idea of accepting suffering on earth so that one would receive one’s eternal reward in heaven. These earthy portrayals of Mary were expressions of a mother in her grief.

As Christ was depicted increasingly as the just judge, Mary became the mediatrix. Bernard of Clairvaux (1090-1153) believed that her role was to be the

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“aqueduct” of God’s grace,³ the channel through whom God’s blessings would flow. She became the approachable one who would intercede for those in distress – accessible and merciful to sinners and those in need. Even today tales abound about Mary as the one who rescues sinners. One bit of folklore describes Jesus, noticing some less-than-desirable folks in heaven, asking Peter if he is screening people properly at the gates of paradise. Peter’s response is: “I do my best to keep them out, Lord, but your mother keeps letting them in through the windows!”

Doctrine

The major theological argument about Mary in the Middle Ages focused on her conception. A feast of the Conception of Mary was celebrated in the East as early as the seventh century, but it was mentioned only rarely before the end of the first millennium in the West.⁴ By the twelfth century, however, it became a theological controversy. Bernard of Clairvaux, despite all his warm and loving devotion to Mary, believed that because she was conceived naturally, she, like every other human person, inherited Original Sin. Therefore, one could not celebrate a feast of her “Immaculate Conception.”⁵ Other famous Doctors of the Church such as the Dominicans, Albert the Great and Thomas Aquinas, and the Franciscan Bonaventure agreed with him. Their belief was based on the

conviction that because redemption had not yet taken place, Mary could not have been born without sin.

The first well known theologian in the West to defend the Immaculate Conception was the Franciscan John Duns Scotus. He argued that if Mary was immaculately conceived, it was in anticipation of the merits of her son Jesus. The Franciscans became defenders of the Immaculate Conception.

Dominicans, while equally devoted to Mary, did not believe the Immaculate Conception could be accepted as a doctrine. Debates ensued. Tavad explains, “By the sixteenth century theologians were divided into two factions, ‘maculists’ and ‘immaculists.’”⁶ The dogma of the Immaculate Conception was not finally defined until 1854.

Bonaventure provided a helpful distinction regarding homage to Mary. Rather than use the Greek word *latria* (worship which should be paid only to God), or *doulia* (veneration paid to the saints), he coined the word *hyperdulia* (veneration greater than that due to the saints, but not worship).⁷ Mary, highest among the saints, was owed special honor and praise, but she was not to be worshipped that is, adored. This distinction has continued to be the teaching of the Catholic Church throughout the centuries.

¹ Marina Warner, *Alone in All Her Sex: The Myth and Cult of the Virgin Mary* (New York: Vintage, 1983), 211.

⁵Cunneen, 152.

²As quoted in Warner, 213.

⁶Tavad, 91-92.

³Sally Cunneen, *In Search of Mary: The Woman and the Symbol* (New York: Ballantine, 1996), 151.

⁷Hilda Graef, *Mary: A History of Doctrine and Devotion*, combined ed. (Notre Dame, IN: Ave Maria Press, 2009): 222-223.

⁴George Tavad, *The Thousand Faces of Mary* (Collegeville, MN: Liturgical Press, 1996): 90-91.

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Mary During the Renaissance and Reformation

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Da Vinci, Leonardo. *Virgin and Child with St. Anne*. circa 1503. Louvre, Paris.

Da Vinci's "Virgin and Child with St. Anne" is remarkable for its very human depiction of Mary and for its serenity, both of which are typical of Renaissance and Reformation period art.

Mary During the Renaissance and Reformation (15th - 17th centuries) by Mary Christine Athans, BVM

The Renaissance and Reformation brought a new appreciation of humanism. The vision of the human person became increasingly earthbound, as did images of Mary. The full-figured Madonna of artists like Raphael and Botticelli depict Mary with her child, sometimes nursing him at her breast. All were very human and serene, as can be seen in Leonardo Da Vinci's remarkable painting, "Virgin and Child with St. Anne." Michelangelo's study of anatomy enhanced his sculpture as is evident in the incomparable *Pieta*: Mary with the dead body of Jesus on her lap – his muscles and veins so real that one would want to touch them. Mary's face reveals a poignant acceptance that seems to transcend sculpted stone out of which it is carved. Mary was pictured, however, as a woman of the Renaissance rather than a first-century Jewish mother.

Mary continued to be a guiding light during the Renaissance when scientific investigation generated new ways of seeing the world. New instruments enabled geographical exploration and new worlds were discovered in Africa, Asia, and the Americas. One need only remember that the name of Columbus' ship on his exploration to the New World in 1492 was the *Santa Maria*. He named the second island he discovered in the Caribbean *Santa María de la Concepción*. Queen Isabella symbolically donated the first gold that Columbus brought her from America for the ceiling of the west

apse of the basilica *Santa Maria Maggiore* in Rome.¹ Mary's influence was attaining global significance. At the same time, the printing press was invented which extended knowledge and corresponding controversy.

Mary in the Protestant Reformation *Martin Luther and Mary*

Although Protestant reformers decried the exaltation of Mary among the Catholics, some did have a special regard for her. Martin Luther (1483-1546) in his earlier years had a warm devotion for Mary. Even after his initial break with the Church, his sermons and tracts regarding Mary were positive and even pious. He believed in the virgin birth and the perpetual virginity of Mary. His famous commentary on the *Magnificat*, written shortly after he had been excommunicated by Pope Leo X in 1521, accepted Mary as *Theotokos*. Luther wrote that "she is the foremost example of the grace of God." He added glowingly, "It needs to be pondered in the heart, what it means to be the Mother of God." He then asks, "Tell me, was not hers a wondrous soul?"²

By Christmas 1530, however, Luther emphasized the separation of Jesus not only from his mother but from the rest of creation. Sally Cunneen, *In Search of Mary: The Woman and the Symbol*, notes that Luther seemed to be convinced that "the more Mary loses, the more Christ wins. By his diminution of Mary, Luther

The first reformers all praised Mary while damning Catholic devotions which invoked her aid, but their successors did not continue this appreciation of her except for an occasional Christmas sermon.

perhaps unconsciously denied the feminine dimension of the sacred and eliminated the one symbol that had for many embodied it.”³

Calvin and His Followers on Mary

Primary among the second generation of reformers, John Calvin (1509-1564), was further removed from medieval piety. He emphasized Mary’s humility but stressed that, “It was more important to be reborn by the Spirit of Christ than to conceive the flesh of Christ in her womb, to have Christ living in herself spiritually than to nurse him at the breast.”⁴ Calvin used the biblical image of Mary to exemplify right living. He was not adverse to praising Mary if it was done in the right way. He believed, however, that one must *never* invoke her.

Calvin adamantly attacked Catholic practices of devotion to Mary. He argued that Catholics had made Mary into an idol. Foundational to Calvin’s theology is the conviction that all doctrine must be grounded in scripture. He believed that theologians should not speculate beyond that. Liturgy as well as hymns should only include what is actually contained in the scriptural text. From Calvin’s perspective, Catholic devotionalism had exceeded all limits.

The first reformers all praised Mary while damning Catholic devotions which invoked her aid, but their successors did not continue this appreciation of her except for an occasional Christmas sermon. Although the Reformed Churches affirm her role as stated in the creeds, a new iconoclasm developed in many Protestant churches, particularly in the Reformed tradition. The rationale was that visual images distracted members of the congregation from hearing the Word of God. In the aftermath of the Peasants War (1524-1526) and other movements of civic unrest, figures of Jesus and Mary

wearing crowns suggested royalty. Ornate altars in the Catholic tradition became bare communion tables in the Reformed movement. The pulpit for preaching the Word became central. Screens and ornaments were removed. Luther became disgusted with bells, incense, and vestments. More radical reformers banished liturgical chant and ritual.⁵ The most extreme Protestant reaction to church decoration and statuary occurred during the era of Cromwell and the Puritan Revolution in England (1649-1660). Statues were beheaded and destroyed. Mary’s role as queen was no longer considered simply theological but took on political and socio-economic overtones. Despite the emphasis on *sola scriptura*, Mary was quickly neglected in Protestant life and thought.

Mary in the Catholic Reform

Many movements for reform emerged in the Catholic Church in the fifteenth and sixteenth centuries. Groups such as the Beguines and the Brethren of the Common Life were among those who made efforts to resist the extravagance and corruption in many sectors of church life.

Erasmus and Mary

Humanists such as Erasmus (1466/1469-1536) departed from scholastic theology, which had dominated the universities in the medieval period, and encouraged broader scholarship and a rebirth of classical wisdom. Erasmus was influenced in his younger years by the Brethren of the Common Life and the *Devotio Moderna* (modern devotion). He became an Augustinian Canon in 1487 and was ordained a priest in 1492. As a biblical scholar, Erasmus translated the New Testament from the original Greek and had considerable influence on theological studies. Although critical of the Catholic Church, particularly the

corruption of that era, he never departed from it. Although Erasmus in his satires attacked extravagant external devotion to Mary, he clearly believed that Mary was inextricably linked to the worship of Christ and had an important role in the church.

Guadalupe

Mexico also became a center for devotion to Mary. In 1531 a simple Aztec peasant, Juan Diego, who had recently converted to Christianity had the extraordinary experience of meeting a beautiful woman on the hill of Tepeyac. She gave him instructions “to go the City of Mexico, to the palace of the Bishop who lives there to whom you will say that I have sent you, and that it is my pleasure that he build me a church in this place.”⁶

Despite variations on the story, it seems clear that it was a startled Spanish bishop of Mexico, Juan de Zumarraga, who first viewed the image of Our Lady of Guadalupe on Juan Diego’s cloak: Mary, depicted as an Aztec maiden. The Aztec maiden resembled the Jewish maiden more than most of the regal portraits of the Renaissance.

Ignatius of Loyola

Mary was an inspiration for efforts at reform in the Catholic Church. One of the religious orders which exemplified this was the Society of Jesus. The story of Ignatius of Loyola (1491-1556) and his conversion to a life of dedication to Christ is generally well known. He was a vain and arrogant soldier, whose leg was injured irreparably at the battle of Pamplona in 1521, warranting his recuperation at the castle of Loyola. During his time of convalescence he read the lives of Christ and the saints, which effected a transformation that caused him to radically change his life.

In February 1522, Ignatius visited the shrine of the Black Virgin at the Benedictine Monastery at Montserrat.

There he began seriously a spiritual journey which would have implications for many future generations. As was the typical custom of knights about to commit

For the Society of Jesus founded by Ignatius and for other reform groups within the Catholic Church, belief in and devotion to Mary became strengthened as her status seemed to be questioned or neglected within Protestantism

themselves to the code of chivalry, on March 24, the Vigil of the Feast of the Annunciation, Ignatius took off his fine clothing and replaced them with pilgrim’s garb. He laid his sword at the foot of Our Lady’s statue and spent the whole night there in prayer dedicating himself to serve Christ the King under Mary’s protection.⁷ For the Society of Jesus founded by Ignatius and for other reform groups within the Catholic Church, belief in and devotion to Mary became strengthened as her status seemed to be questioned or neglected within Protestantism.

The Council of Trent (1545-1563) and After

After several aborted efforts, the Council of Trent was finally convoked in 1545, and met in three sessions continuing to 1563. The council’s efforts were directed on two tracks: disciplinary and doctrinal. The only time Mary is mentioned at Trent is in the Decree on Original Sin, approved on June 17, 1546. It explicitly excludes her and states: “Nevertheless this same holy council

Mary was an inspiration for efforts at reform in the Catholic Church

Mary During the Renaissance and Reformation

Mary Christine Athans, BVM draws on the latest historical research, the fruits of post-Vatican II Jewish-Christian dialogue, the insights of feminist theology, and contemporary spiritual reflection to rediscover the Jewish Mary: a woman of enormous courage, strength, and prayer. In restoring Mary to her own time and place, she helps us rediscover Mary's message for our own time.

declares that it is not its intention to include in this decree on original sin the blessed and immaculate Virgin Mary, Mother of God; but it declares that the constitutions of Pope Sixtus IV of happy memory are to be observed.⁷⁸ Sixtus, the Franciscan Francesco della Rovere, had approved the feast of the Immaculate Conception in 1476 with its own Mass and office. Marian devotions were defended during the Council of Trent by Jesuit theologians Peter Canisius, Francisco Suarez and Robert Bellarmine.⁹ Catholics became defensive about the doctrines and practices which Protestants denounced. Protestants outlawed the rosary. In turn, Pope Pius V recognized it and advanced the devotion further by instituting the Feast of the Holy Rosary, commemorating the naval victory over the Turks at Lepanto (October 7, 1571), which—because of the many rosaries recited that day—he attributed to Mary's intercession. Jesuit Peter Canisius

preached that devotion to Mary would help to repair the damage to the Catholic Church caused by the Reformation. Marian sodalities under the direction of the Jesuits flourished in Catholic urban centers in Europe.¹⁰ In the period after Trent, the divide widened between Catholics and Protestants regarding the role of Mary in their respective churches.

The first fifteen hundred years of Christianity saw Mary transformed from a Jewish maiden to a Greek Empress to a Western European Queen and even Aztec Indian woman. Every culture found in Mary a person whom they honored, revered and who became for them a path of access to God. After the Reformation, however, she became a source of contention. Finding "the real Mary" became more of a challenge.

¹Mary Christine Athans, "Mary in the American Catholic Church," *U.S. Catholic Historian* 8, no. 4 (Fall 1989):105.

²George Tavard, *The Thousand Faces of Mary* (Collegeville, MN: Liturgical Press, 1996), 111.

³Sally Cunneen, *In Search of Mary: The Woman and the Symbol*, 201.

⁴As quoted in Tavard, 120-121.

⁵Sally Cunneen, *In Search of Mary: The Woman and the Symbol* (New York: Ballantine, 1996), 206.

⁶As quoted in Mary DeCock, "Our Lady of Guadalupe: Symbol of Liberation?" in *Mary According to Women*, ed, Carol Frances Jegen (Kansas City, MO: Leaven Press, 1985), 114.

⁷George E. Ganss, ed., *Ignatius of Loyola: The Spiritual Exercises and Selected Works* (New York: Paulist Press, 1991), 26.

⁸Heinrich Denziger and John F. Clarkson, eds., *The Church Teaches: Documents of the Church in English Translation* (St. Louis: B. Herder, 1955), 160-61.

⁹Richard P. McBrien, *Catholicism*, 2 vols., rev. ed. (San Francisco: HarperSanFrancisco, 1994).

¹⁰Trevor Johnson, "Mary in Early Modern Europe," in *Mary: The Complete Resource*, ed. Boss, 368.

MARY OF NAZARETH

Mary in Politics, Devotion and Doctrine

FutureChurch



Podesti, Francesco. *The Promulgation of the dogma of the Immaculate Conception*. Commissioned 1854. Vatican Museums.

The Room of the Immaculate Conception was commissioned by Pope Pius IX following his Promulgation of the dogma of the Immaculate Conception.

Revolution and Romanticism: Mary in Politics, Devotion and Doctrine (17th - 19th Centuries) BY MARY CHRISTINE ATHANS, BVM

How did Europe move from a culture that had been predominantly Catholic to one which also accepted a variety of Protestant churches? How did it adapt to a world where the emperor was no longer the preeminent power, but where kings and queens ruled until the cataclysm of the French Revolution in 1789? In the aftermath of the Reformation in the period referred to as Absolutism and the Enlightenment (approximately the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries), tensions between the churches and the states exploded. The culmination of these conflicts in the Thirty Years War (1618-1648) resulted in the Peace of Westphalia. Sometimes described as “the end of the wars of religion,” it allowed for the existence of Lutheran and Calvinist churches as well as Catholicism. In that era, however, people could not conceive of any political/ecclesiastical structure other than a nation state with an established church. It mandated, therefore, that “the religion of the prince is the religion of the people” (*cuius regio eius religio*). If one wanted to worship as a Catholic or a Lutheran or a Calvinist, one had to find a country or province where the ruler was of that faith. Religious pluralism was still far away.

Catholics continued to look to Christ as King and Mary as Queen. Pilgrimages to Marian shrines were advertised. Wilhelm von Gumpenberg (1609-1675) published the *Atlas Marianus* in the 1650s. In

several volumes it offered brief histories of over 1,000 shrines in Mary’s honor around the Catholic world.¹ Catholics were encouraged by their clergy and their rulers to join these pilgrimages.

The Catholic dynasties of Europe often chose Mary as their patroness. Maximilian I, who ruled Bavaria from 1598-1651, exemplified this commitment. He “not only developed a rich personal devotion to Mary, consecrating himself to her with a vow written in his own blood, but also adopted the Virgin as the chief emblem of his considerable dynastic and confessional ambitions. In 1601, the duke required all Bavarians by law to carry rosary beads constantly.”²

In the seventeenth century France was divided between the influence of Jansenism, (a kind of Catholic Calvinism which demanded moral rigorism), and the opulent excesses of the Bourbon monarchy flourishing at Versailles. One of the more radical approaches to Marian devotion was espoused by Louis Grignon de Montfort (1673-1716), author of *True Devotion to the Blessed Virgin*, who promoted the metaphor of “slavery” as a description of absolute surrender to Mary. He believed one could not approach Christ on one’s own. To reach Christ one had to go through Mary.³

In the eighteenth century a new focus developed on “the spiritual motherhood of Mary and on her purity, as underscored

Skepticism infiltrated religion in this era and affected Catholic devotion to Mary. Some Marian feasts were eliminated from the liturgical calendar. Marian devotions were sidelined except in Spain and Italy.

in the doctrine of her Immaculate Conception.”⁴ This laid the groundwork for both the doctrinal and devotional explosion of Marian devotion in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries. With the exception of some Anglicans, those professing Protestant orthodoxy or Pietism were uninterested in Mary.

The Enlightenment

Negative reaction began to develop among many Christians to both the baroque spirituality and the arid orthodoxy of the period. That response was due, in part, to an excitement regarding advances in science, “the rule of reason,” and the so-called “inevitability of progress,” particularly among many intellectuals. This spirit of the Enlightenment contributed to the rise of Deism with its disregard for revelation, and its image of God as “the Watchmaker” who wound up the universe and sat passively by while it moved along. The rationalists often viewed religion as superstition because it could not be proved by science or reason. They believed in a world of liberty, equality, religious tolerance, and a government by the people. Skepticism infiltrated religion in this era and affected Catholic devotion to Mary. Some Marian feasts were eliminated from the liturgical calendar. Marian devotions were sidelined except in Spain and Italy.

Mary During the French Revolution

Because of the “alliance between throne and altar” religion, as well as royalty, became a target when the French Revolution (1789-1799) erupted. In addition to beheading the king and queen, one of the goals of the “Reign of Terror” (c. 1792-1795) was to destroy Catholicism. Church property was confiscated. Nuns and priests were sent to the guillotine.

A “Goddess of Reason” and other figures were established to replace

Mary and the saints. Images of Mary were identified as symbols of the privileged aristocracy and were broken or burned and was replaced by the allegorical figure named “Marianne,” who personified the French Republic. Revolutionaries chanted, “Virgin of Liberty, deliver us from Kings and Popes! Virgin of Equality, deliver us from aristocrats.” The *Ave Maria* was rewritten, “Hail Marianne, full of strength, the People are with thee. Blessed is the fruit of thy womb, the Republic.”⁵

After Napoleon attained power, however, he believed that Christianity could be the “glue” for his empire. He needed the Church to affirm his authority so he negotiated a concordat with the papacy in 1801. Three years later he invited Pope Pius VII to preside over his coronation as emperor to give credibility to himself and to his empire. Napoleon would go only so far in acknowledging Catholicism, however. He took the crown from the pope and crowned himself.

Mary in the Nineteenth Century: Devotion and Doctrine

With the fall of Napoleon in 1815, not only were kings, queens and the pope restored to their thrones, but Jesus and Mary were as well. The effort to return to pre-French Revolutionary Europe began. The trend toward centralization gained momentum. Romanticism flourished and the medieval period was idealized. There was a devotional renewal in Europe; some referred to it as a “second spring.” Missionary work took on new life.

Mary on the American Frontier

In the United States where multiple ethnic groups migrated between 1820 and 1924, devotion to Mary manifested itself in Italian feasts, Irish novenas, French Christmas crèches and German hymns. Together with devotional

renewal and a missionary thrust, a new sense of excitement evolved in the church in America.

Religious orders were restored or re-founded (e.g. the Jesuits and the Holy Ghost Congregation), and new congregations, many of them devoted to Mary, sprang up on both sides of the Atlantic Ocean. American orders such as the Sisters of Charity of the Blessed Virgin Mary, founded in Philadelphia in 1833; the Dominican Sisters of the Most Holy Rosary founded in Sinsinawa, Wisconsin in 1847; and the School Sisters of Notre Dame established in Milwaukee, Wisconsin in 1849 all had a particular devotion to Mary.

For some Catholics, Mary became associated with a kind of “frontier imagery,” and with “virgin territory.” Like those who headed toward the frontier, Mary heard a call from God asking her to move beyond the ordinary boundaries of her life—a challenge she accepted. Like the Protestant version of “the errand into the wilderness,” and the mission to establish “God’s New Israel”, Catholics attempted, under the banner of Mary, to move Catholicism to the West. During that era Mary was a “frontier” model, even though in some instances, those efforts were coupled with a desire to escape the Nativist riots in the East.⁶

American Protestants and Mary

Elizabeth Cady Stanton was among the Protestant women activists in the United States who acknowledged that certain passages of the Bible were oppressive for women. She initiated and chaired the launch of *The Women's Bible*. The purpose was to revise scriptural passages that excluded or oppressed women. Eventually published in 1898, Stanton was conscious of the fact that women in Catholicism had a role model in Mary. In addition, congregations of women religious in the Church provided a feminine

dimension, which she saw as lacking in Protestantism. In her 1885 essay, “Has Christianity Benefitted Women?” Stanton stated that the Catholic Church “in its holy sisterhoods” and its “worship of the Virgin Mary, mother of Jesus... preserved some recognition of the feminine element in its religion; but from Protestantism it is wholly eliminated.”⁷

Harriet Beecher Stowe, author of *Uncle Tom's Cabin*, was best known among the reformers. With the proceeds of her popular book this daughter and wife of Calvinist ministers traveled to Europe as an “art-pilgrim.” She “longed for visual art that affirmed the power and goodness of women.” She particularly appreciated the Sistine Madonna of Raphael. She loved “its historical accuracy in representing the dark-eyed Jewish maiden” and was enamored of “the mysterious resemblance and sympathy between the face of the mother and the divine child.” She admitted that it affected her deeply and saw in it a depiction of the “idea of sorrow in heaven – sorrow for the lost, in the heart of God himself – which forms the most sacred mystery of Christianity.”⁸ Still, Mary was not a likely subject for dialogue between Catholics and Protestants, much less with Jews.

Poetic Appreciation of Mary in England

Amid some of the pious and sentimental verse of the nineteenth century, there appeared the almost mystical poetry of Gerard Manley Hopkins, S.J. (1844-1889). An Anglican who entered the Catholic Church and became a Jesuit priest and poet, his poem “The Blessed Mother Compared to the Air We Breathe” is a portrayal of Mary incarnating Christ anew.

*Of her flesh he took flesh:
He does take fresh and fresh,
Though much the mystery how,*

*Not flesh but spirit now
And makes, O marvelous!
New Nazareths in us...⁹*

Hopkins’ appreciation of nature aligned him with the Romantic poets but, in Cunneen’s words, “Drawing on the tradition as he found it, one in which Mary had long stood as a visible sign of the work of the Spirit, Hopkins reimagined Mary in a way that showed her at home in a united, scientifically conceived universe.”¹⁰ He wrote of the Incarnation as a continuing reality and of humans as part of the body of Christ.

John Henry Cardinal Newman (1801-1890), also a convert from Anglicanism was influenced by his research into the Church Fathers. He wrote and spoke poetically about Mary. His 1849 sermon “The Glories of Mary for the Sake of her Son” described her as a symbol of the Church and as the “daughter of Eve unfallen.” He preached, “She raised herself aloft silently, and has grown into her place in the Church by a tranquil influence as a natural process. She was as some fair tree, stretching forth her fruitful branches and her fragrant leaves, and overshadowing the territory of the saints.”¹¹

Both Hopkins and Newman brought simple images of Mary, unlike her royal images of earlier years.

Marian Apparitions

The Church has always proceeded with caution regarding alleged apparitions. Edward Schillebeeckx, O.P. in his volume *Mary, Mother of the Redemption*, stated, “The Church’s approbation of an apparition or private revelation is... never an infallible proof of its historical truth and authenticity.” He added, “It is merely an official confirmation of the fact that sufficient evidence has emerged from the investigation to enable us to be cautiously certain in our

acceptance of the divine authenticity of the apparition on rational grounds".¹²

Even if the Church has approved of an apparition, it does not belong to "the deposit of faith"—doctrines to which a Catholic would be expected to give assent. A Catholic, while respecting the authority of the Church, is not required to accept the apparition.

Since the eighteenth century the church has generally relied on the local bishops to give formal approval to such phenomena. The, bishop, after investigation, does not assert as a fact that the apparition has taken place, but only states that it is not contrary to the faith. Therefore, devotion is not prohibited in the place at which the apparition is alleged to have occurred. According to Schillebeeckx, "All the Church declares is that, in her judgment, they are in no way contrary to faith and morals, and that there are sufficient indications for their pious and cautious approval by human faith."¹³

Perhaps the most dramatic events concerning Mary were her purported apparitions during the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, mostly to peasant women and children. Best known of the apparitions of Mary are those at Lourdes in France. In 1858 a fourteen-year-old peasant girl, Bernadette Soubirous, claimed to have seen a vision. The lady in the vision asked Bernadette to drink from an invisible fountain. When she scratched the earth, water welled up and became a source of healing for generations. On March 25, 1858, Bernadette asked the lady in the vision who she was and received the answer: "I am the Immaculate Conception." These appearances at Lourdes occurred after the definition of the Immaculate Conception by Pope Pius IX in 1854 and seemed to be a confirmation of the dogma that had recently been pronounced.

Defining the Immaculate Conception

Ironically, in order to understand how the Immaculate Conception came to be defined, one must look at the political context of the Church and the states in the aftermath of the French Revolution and the Napoleonic era. The goal of both the Church and the states was "The Restoration"—a return of Europe to pre-revolutionary status. What most of the leaders failed to realize was people under the age of twenty-five had little or no recollection of what life had been like prior to the revolution. They were ripe, therefore, for the revolutions of 1830 and 1848.

Liberty, democracy, equality, separation of church and state, freedom of speech, freedom of the press, and freedom of religion were all perceived as threats to the Church.

Liberty, democracy, equality, separation of church and state, freedom of speech, freedom of the press, and freedom of religion were all perceived as threats to the Church. The near destruction of the Church during the French Revolution had confirmed the conviction that a union of church and state with the Catholic Church as the one true Church was the only ecclesiastical/political structure, which would allow the Church to survive. It was clear, as riots and revolutions continued to occur in the period 1815-1871 that stability had not been restored.

Pope Gregory XVI, envisioning an on-going struggle between the Church and the modern world, promulgated the encyclical *Mirari Vos* (1832), in which he condemned separation of church and state, freedom of the press and freedom of religion. Many Catholics believed that the only defense

against liberalism was a centralized Church. The result was the growth of ultramontanism with its strong emphasis on papal authority and the centralization of the Church. It signified going "beyond the mountains"—the Alps—to Rome to find the answers.

The movement for the political unification of Italy (the *risorgimento*), became more menacing to the Church as the nineteenth century progressed. The Papal States, a theocracy in the middle of the Italian peninsula, represented the opposite of all the republicans were striving to accomplish. Pius IX (1846-1878) had initially accepted some liberal ideas when he ascended the papal throne in 1846. However, the revolution of 1848 was shattering with its riots in the streets; the assassination of Pius's confidante and the premier of the Papal States, Pellegrino Rossi; and the fact that Pius himself was a prisoner of the revolution until he escaped into exile. The Republicans flooded into Rome and voted to end the temporal power of the pope, although the struggle continued until 1870.¹⁴ In response to a cry for help by the pope, the French army occupied Rome in 1849. "Pio Nono," as he was known, especially in Italy, was returned to his papal throne in 1850.

With its temporal power fading away, the church began to compensate by relying more on its religious authority. In 1854, Pope Pius IX made a radical move. As his political power began to decline, to underscore his authority, he unilaterally declared the doctrine of the Immaculate Conception to be a solemn dogma of the Catholic Church. Devotion to Mary as the Immaculate Conception had been a long practice despite the theological disputes regarding Mary during the thirteenth century and after. And although Pius IX consulted with bishops from around the world, he did not call an ecumenical council as

had been done in the past, to solemnly define this theological teaching. He reserved the power of definition to himself.

On December 8, 1854, after a splendid papal procession to St. Peter's Basilica, Pius IX promulgated the constitution *Ineffabilis Deus*, proclaiming “the doctrine which holds that the blessed Virgin Mary, at the very first instant of her Conception, by a singular privilege and grace of the omnipotent God, in consideration of the merits of Jesus Christ, the Savior of mankind, was preserved free from all stain of original sin.” The definition of the Immaculate Conception was a surprise to Protestants, to the Eastern Orthodox, and even to many Catholics. In addition to formalizing a doctrine about Mary, it had huge implications and some scholars have seen it as a test case for declaring papal infallibility.¹⁵

Papal Infallibility and Mary

Pius IX was challenged by modern theology, liberal political theories, new scientific understandings, and the disaffection of many workers during the industrial revolution who were attracted to socialism. In 1864, following the lead of Gregory XVI in *Mirari Vos*, Pius IX promulgated the *Syllabus of Errors*, an enumeration of the condemnation of errors from some thirty previous papal documents. The concluding statement condemned anyone who believed that “The Roman Pontiff can, and ought, to reconcile himself, and come to terms with progress, liberalism, and modern civilization.”¹⁶ The *Syllabus*, once again, condemned fundamental concepts especially dear to people in the United States, such as religious liberty, separation of church and state, and freedom of the press.

Understandably, Protestants in the United States were nervous about these statements, especially with the enormous migration of Catholics to America in

the nineteenth century. They feared that, as the number of Catholics with a right to vote in the United States increased, the democratic/republican system of government in their nation could be reversed. In Peter D'Agostino's words, “Nativism intensified in the United States as Know-Nothings shuddered at the sight of Celtic arrivals with rosary beads overrunning the Protestant Israel.”¹⁷ This migration had huge implications for Catholics who were suffering from Nativism and who were trying to prove that they could be good Americans and still be Catholic. Exuberant devotion to Mary, frequently manifested by the new immigrant groups only instilled greater fear in Protestants.

The high point of ultramontanism was Vatican Council I, which opened on the feast of the Immaculate Conception, December 8, 1869. Many of the bishops present, eighty per cent of whom were Italian, thought that a declaration of papal infallibility was “inopportune” and some eighty even absented themselves from the council rather than vote against the statement. Despite the misgivings of many of the members of the council, the motion passed by a vote of 533-2. Three days before the dogma was formally proclaimed, war broke out between long time enemies France and Prussia. Napoleon III, whose troops had been defending the Papal State, withdrew his army from Rome because of the Prussian challenge. The Italian armies immediately invaded Rome. The Pope proclaimed the doctrine of papal infallibility on July 18, 1870, and the members of the council hastily departed.

The pope—now declared infallible—became “the prisoner of the Vatican.” A “Law of Guarantees” was passed by the Italian government which “allowed the pope to retain his personal status as a sovereign [including] the use of the Papal palaces, offered him a substantial

The definition of the Immaculate Conception was a surprise to Protestants, to the Eastern Orthodox, and even to many Catholics. In addition to formalizing a doctrine about Mary, it had huge implications and some scholars have seen it as a test case for declaring papal infallibility.

Mary in Politics, Devotion, and Doctrine

Mary Christine Athans, BVM, draws doughk@aol.com on the latest historical research, the fruits of post-Vatican II Jewish-Christian dialogue, the insights of feminist theology, and contemporary spiritual reflection to rediscover the Jewish Mary: a woman of enormous courage, strength, and prayer. In restoring Mary to her own time and place, she helps us rediscover Mary's message for our own time.


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pension, and abandoned most of the control of the state over the Church in Italy.”¹⁸ The pope, however, refused to accept the agreement, or to recognize the new regime.

Recourse to Mary to free the pope became part of an on-going crusade of prayer through the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. Devotion to Mary, especially under the title of the Immaculate Conception, went hand-in-hand with the infallibility of the pope. As the pope's temporal power waned, his religious power was enhanced. Finally, in 1929, the Lateran Treaty with Mussolini finally established Vatican City as a sovereign state.

The “Aryanization” of Jesus and Mary

In the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, three major figures caused western culture to re-think its goals

¹Trevor Johnson, “Mary in Early Modern Europe,” in *Mary: The Complete Resource*, ed. Sara Jane Boss (London: Continuum, 2007), 363–84.

²T. Johnson, 365.

³Sally Cunneen, *In Search of Mary: The Woman and the Symbol* (New York: Ballantine Books, 1996), 228–30.

⁴T. Johnson, 381.

⁵Cunneen, 230–31.

⁶Mary Christine Athans, “Mary in the American Catholic Church,” *U.S. Catholic Historian* 8, no. 4 (Fall 1989):108.

⁷As quoted in Cunneen, 258.

⁸As quoted in Cunneen, 263.

⁹Gerard Manley Hopkins, *Poems and Prose of Gerard Manley Hopkins* (London: Penguin Classics, 1985), 56.

¹⁰Cunneen, 256.

¹¹As quoted in Cunneen, 250.

¹²As quoted in Hilda Graef, *Mary: A History of Doctrine and Devotion*, combined ed. (Notre Dame, IN: Ave Maria Press, 2009), 344.

and ideals: Karl Marx, Charles Darwin, and Sigmund Freud. Each of these figures in some way became a challenge to religion. In particular, Charles Darwin's ideas on evolution and “the survival of the fittest” developed into a pseudo-science to claim Nordic superiority. In turn, some writers such as Huston Stewart Chamberlain, claimed that Jesus was not Jewish but Galilean, and therefore an Aryan and not a Jew. Johann Fichte questioned how Jesus could be Jewish when he was, in fact, so German?¹⁹

This led to a depiction of Jesus and Mary in nineteenth and early twentieth century art of Jesus and Mary as Nordic figures—often with long blond curls and blue eyes. Once again, Jesus and Mary had become creatures of the culture of their time.

¹³Ibid.

¹⁴J. Derek Holmes and Bradford W. Bickers, *A Short History of the Catholic Church* (New York: Paulist Press, 1984), 237–38.

¹⁵James J. Hennesey, “A Prelude to Vatican II: American Bishops and the Definition of the Immaculate Conception,” *Theological Studies* 25, no. 3 (1964): 409–19.

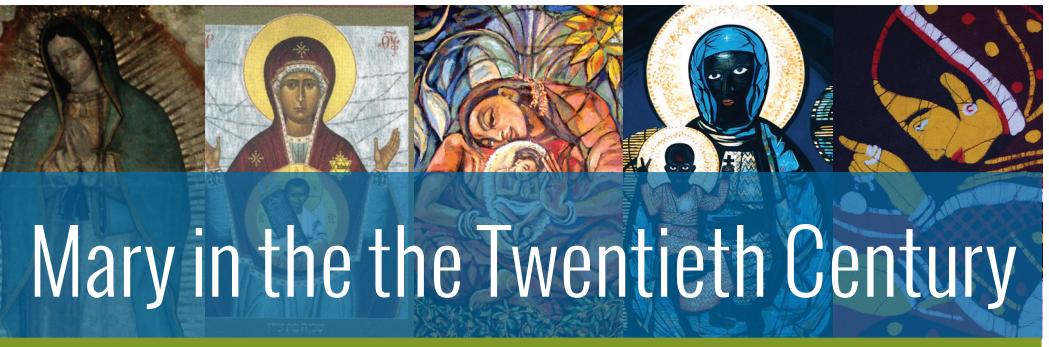
¹⁶John P. Dolan, *Catholicism: An Historical Survey* (Woodbury, NY: Barron's Educational Series, 1968), 184.

¹⁷Peter R. D'Agostino, *Rome in America: Transnational Catholic Ideology from the Risorgimento to Fascism* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2004), 32.

¹⁸Josef L. Altholz, *The Churches in the Nineteenth Century* (New York: Bobbs-Merrill, 1967), 85.

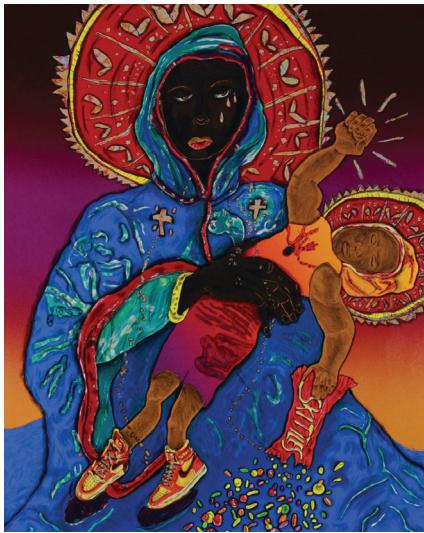
¹⁹See *In Quest of the Jewish Mary: The Mother of Jesus in History, Theology and Spirituality* (New York: Orbis Books, 2013), pp. 98–100.

MARY OF NAZARETH



Mary in the Twentieth Century

FutureChurch



Humphrey, Margo. "Fear Not: I got You," 2013.

"My work portrays Trayvon Martin on the night of the fateful incident—alone, scared, on the edge of life and death."

"Historically," says Humphrey, "the Madonna doesn't play a large role in African American religious imagery. In imagining what may have been going through Martin's mind at the time of his death, I thought maybe it's about time we had her appear. She would be a comforting force, to be with him in the time of transition between this world and the next."

Mary in the Twentieth Century (1920 - 1965) by Mary Christine Athans, BVM

New immigration laws in the United States in 1924 militated against the influx of Catholics, Jews and some Protestants from southern and Eastern European countries. An unexpected by-product of this discrimination was that financial resources, which had been devoted to the immigrants, were now available to build the Catholic Church in the United States. The vision of a new "Catholic Christendom" in America evolved.¹

Parishes unexpectedly had funds to build new churches and schools. Coupled with this brick-and-mortar phenomenon was the Neo-Thomistic Revival, which emerged in the 1920s. It emphasized "the thirteenth—the greatest of centuries," a medieval era when devotion to Mary was at its height.² Catholic life flourished with chivalric images, litanies, May crownings, and rosary processions where thousands gathered. The Neo-Thomistic thought of Jacques Maritain and Etienne Gilson, neo-Gothic architecture, Gregorian chant, sodalities in honor of Our Lady, guild programs, the liturgical renewal, thriving Catholic schools, the Catholic Worker Movement and even the often radical radio sermons of Father Charles E. Coughlin gave Catholics in the United States a new sense of identity.

Three Significant Movements

In this period, Mary was portrayed as "the perfect woman." All Catholic girls and women were to emulate her. Three particular movements idealizing Mary arose.³ First, the Sodality of Our Lady, a

national movement led by Fr. Daniel A. Lord, S.J. with its magazine, *The Queen's Work*, became very influential among high school and college students. Fr. Lord developed the Summer School of Catholic Action (SSCA), at which thousands of high school and college students would assemble for a week in four difference locations in the U.S. to hear inspirational talks, socialize, build spirit, identity and a commitment to Catholic values.

Father Lord also composed hymns such as "Mother Beloved," and wrote dramas and musicals with Marian themes, which he sometimes directed at various Catholic high schools around the country. His contagious enthusiasm had an enormous impact on Catholic young people and their commitment to Christ as king and Mary as queen. He was especially concerned about the development of morals and attitudes regarding modesty, dress, purity, and the censorship of films for which he helped to develop the Legion of Decency. Lord was a charismatic leader in the 1930s-1950s who cultivated devotion to Mary among young people in the United States. For some young women, however, she appeared to be a loving, but unattainable, model.

Secondly, the novena movement as exemplified by devotion to the Sorrowful Mother received an enthusiastic response. Dedicated to the Seven Sorrows of Mary, this movement was founded by a Servite priest, James R. Keane, in 1937. Within one year, 70,000 persons attended

thirty-eight services to the Sorrowful Mother in Chicago. The novena moved to other cities and countries, and was translated into thirty-five languages with cumulative attendance estimated at thirty-five million people. It was broadcast on the radio each Friday night for those who could not attend services in church. A pamphlet entitled *Novena Notes* allowed people to continue their reflections at home. During World War II, when mothers were losing their sons in battle, this devotion proved to be a solace for many families.⁴ Along with the novena to Our Lady of Perpetual Help—also popular during the Depression and World War II—it was among the most influential devotions in the United States during the pre-Vatican II era.

Thirdly, although the apparitions at Fatima took place in 1917, devotion to Our Lady of Fatima did not evolve into its more elaborate form until the post World War II period. Endorsed by the papacy, it reached its high point in the 1940s-1950s because of anxiety over Communist infiltration of the United States, especially during the McCarthy era. There were also claims of apparitions of Our Lady at Necedah, Wisconsin, which were never formally acknowledged by the Church. As a result of Fatima, and certainly to a lesser degree of Necedah, prayer and repentance for the conversion of Russia became major themes in Catholic piety during these years.

Many Catholics feared what they understood to be the diabolical dimensions of Communism. According to Thomas Kselman and Steven Avella, “Catholics perceived another battle raging in which Christ and Mary had sided with the United States to fight Satan and his Communist allies... Thousands of Catholics who visited Necedah and the millions who believed in Our Lady of Fatima saw the Cold War on earth as

a reflection of a war in heaven.”⁵ Once again, Mary had become an instrument of politics.

Reflecting on Mary as “The Reed of God”

For centuries, most writings about Mary were either theological tracts—antiseptic intellectual discourses—or sentimental prayers and meditations with an emotional and often exaggerated piety. In both cases, “the real Mary” seemed elusive. During the Neo-Thomistic Revival, however, an English Catholic laywoman, a social worker named Caryll Houselander, wrote a small volume about Mary entitled *The Reed of God*. In the words of F.J. Sheed “...she wrote the plainest prose, deeply emotional, totally unsentimental, taking us to the depths in Christ and Mary and ourselves.”⁶

Houselander made Mary human. In the chapter on “Advent” she wrote: “For nine months Christ grew in His Mother’s body. By His own will she formed Him from herself, from the simplicity of her daily life. She had nothing to give Him but herself. He asked for nothing else. She gave Him herself.”⁷ Influenced by the theology of the Mystical Body of Christ, she presented Mary as a model for each person whose mission it is to bear Christ in the world. She wrote of Mary walking the streets of Nazareth and Jerusalem as a strong and courageous woman of great simplicity. Houselander’s writings resonated with Catholics who were committed to social justice and liturgical renewal. Women, especially those in Catholic high schools and colleges, meditated on *The Reed of God*, and found hope as they searched for Mary as a human person.

The Proclamation of the Assumption of Mary

The declaration of the dogma of the bodily assumption of Mary into heaven contributed even further to the image of the perfect Mary. Pius XII, who became pope in 1939, was an ardent advocate of this doctrine. He was also a zealous foe of atheistic Communism. Because of popular enthusiasm regarding Marian devotion, as well as a pervasive fear of Communism, defining Mary’s assumption was well received by Catholics. Papal authority to make such a declaration was more readily accepted because of the definition of the Immaculate Conception in 1854 and the declaration of papal infallibility in 1870.

Although there was no biblical evidence to support Mary’s bodily assumption into heaven, the feast has been celebrated by Christians since the fifth century. It was a major feast for the Greek Orthodox who had no objection to the definition itself, but were exceedingly troubled by the pope’s unilateral definition of the Immaculate Conception, and the claim of papal infallibility. For the Protestants it was a setback to the hope for dialogue and unity. In 1950, in the apostolic constitution *Munificentissimus Deus*, Pius XII solemnly proclaimed the dogma of the Assumption of Mary.

Richard McBrien suggests that in the aftermath of two world wars and the horrors of the death camps at Auschwitz, defining the belief in the Assumption of Mary was an acknowledgment of the dignity of the human person and faith in bodily resurrection.⁸ The psychologist Carl Jung surprisingly welcomed the definition and saw it as “the prototype of man’s bodily resurrection.”⁹ Possibly this recognition of the Assumption of Mary links her to her ancient Jewish heritage

and to the conviction of the Pharisees regarding bodily resurrection.⁹ They had proclaimed God's incomparable power by which "at the end of time God will cause the dead to live again."¹⁰ Mary became an exemplar of this belief.

Conclusion

Mary emerged as an iconic figure in Christianity partly as a result of legends about her that filled the gaps left by the gospels. As the church became westernized, the Jewish maiden of the gospels came to be replaced by the idealized empress. Christological disputes at the ecumenical councils of the fourth and fifth centuries required that Mary's role in salvation be more clearly defined. At Ephesus she was affirmed as *Theotokos*, which gave license to those who wanted to exalt her further.

While devotion to Mary seems to have evolved prior to Ephesus, this council's affirmation allowed for the explosion of Marian devotion in the Middle Ages and thereafter. As the people became more removed from the liturgy, and as monastic communities of women and men developed which had an ardent devotion to her, Mary's approachability became a focus for those of every age and class. Mary took on the figure of the most exalted woman of each era despite her simple Jewish roots. Although Mary belongs to every time and place, her historical person cannot be denied. In the post Renaissance period she was ignored by the Reformers and exalted by the Roman Catholics and Eastern Orthodox Christians. There was little concern for her Jewish roots until the later twentieth century.

Mary and Vatican II

During the immediate pre-Vatican II period, scholars such as Yves Congar, Rene Laurentin, Karl Rahner, Edward Schillebeeckx, and Otto Semmelroth, shed new light on Mary by placing her in the context of the mystery

of Christ and the church. Edward Schillebeeckx, in the second edition of his volume *Mary, Mother of the Redemption* (1955), added a chapter on "The Gospel Picture of the Mother of Jesus," in which he draws attention to the Jewish Mary. Exploring the historical figure of "Miriam," the Jewish mother of Jesus, he raised the question, "is the Madonna of Catholic Mariology the same as the Jewish mother of Jesus?"¹¹

In preparation for the Second Vatican Council, which convened hardly more than a decade after the definition of the Assumption, and with devotion to Mary increasingly more popular, many bishops wanted to continue the "Mariology from above," an emphasis on Mary's supernatural prerogatives, articulating her titles and her privileges, a practice which had been common both doctrinally and devotionally for centuries. A separate document on Mary was drafted and presented at the first session of the council, but there was no time for it to be considered.

**Mary belongs to every time
and place, her historical person
cannot be denied.**

After Session I (October 8 – December 8, 1962), many bishops found that their horizons were widened. They became more aware of biblical scholarship and theological insights, which had provided new data for their consideration. Theologians such as Rahner, Congar, de Lubac and Schillebeeckx were now *periti* at the council. A new "Christology from below" (an emphasis on the humanity of Jesus, while not denying his divinity), seemed to warrant a consideration of a "Mariology from below" as well.

At Session II (September 29 - December 4, 1963), the draft of a separate document

on Mary was brought back unchanged. Some of the bishops, however, who were involved in developing *Lumen Gentium, The Dogmatic Constitution on the Church*, were convinced that incorporation of statements on Mary in that document was possible. George Tavard, a council *peritus*, described the situation as follows: "As soon as the suggestion was made, however, a number of suspicious bishops began to wonder if there was not a dark plot to downgrade the Virgin Mary in piety and possibly in doctrine."¹²

With tempers rising, Pope Paul VI assented to the request of the moderators and presidents to have a vote on this issue. Following a heated debate, the council fathers decided by a very narrow margin (1,114 to 1074) to reject the first schema on Mary and to draft a new text for presentation at the next session. This significant vote eventually resulted in the decision that a final chapter on Mary would be included in *Lumen Gentium*. It created a highly emotional atmosphere, which continued to affect the council throughout its later sessions.

The approach and tone of the statement on Mary changed considerably. *Lumen Gentium* asserts, "She is endowed with the high office and dignity of the Mother of the Son of God, and therefore she is also the beloved daughter of the Father and the temple of the Holy Spirit" (53). However, because she belongs to "the race of Adam she is at the same time also united to all those who are to be saved."¹³ Like us, Mary is among the redeemed. Anthony J. Tambasco notes that "The final text of the Council kept only 14 of 117 papal quotations of the original draft and greatly increased the biblical references." Quotations from scripture and the Fathers of the Church substantially exceed the notes on papal decrees and encyclicals in *Lumen Gentium*.

Even the title of the chapter caused controversy. Some wanted "Mary,

Mother of the Church” to be part of its heading. Others disagreed because they were convinced that wording would depict Mary as “above” and “outside” the Church and should be avoided. Chapter VIII was finally titled “The Role of the Blessed Virgin Mary, Mother of God, in the Mystery of Christ and the Church.”

Pope Paul VI, however, in the closing ceremony of the second session on November 21, 1963, perhaps to assuage the anger of the minority, stated, “To the glory of the Blessed Virgin and for our consolation we declare the Most Holy Mary is Mother of the Church.” George Tavard commented, “Undoubtedly some among the *periti*, and possibly among the bishops, considered this introduction of a new Marian title highhanded in form, for it was widely held that the council had implicitly rejected the title.”¹⁵

Schillebeeckx concurred. “Paul VI felt called on to satisfy the minority position in the council...by making Mary ‘mother of the church’ on his own personal, and thus non-conciliar authority.”¹⁶

Throughout the council there continued to be the “minimalists” and the “maximalists” regarding Mary.

Emotions spilled over into the post-Vatican II Church when traditional Marian devotionalism appeared to evaporate. However, a new appreciation of Mary eventually emerged in succeeding decades as historical studies, new scripture scholarship, theological insights, feminist theology and interfaith dialogue intermingled to offer new opportunities for insights into the Jewish Mary.

Mary in the Twentieth Century

Mary Christine Athans, BVM, draws on the latest historical research, the fruits of post-Vatican II Jewish-Christian dialogue, the insights of feminist theology, and contemporary spiritual reflection to rediscover the Jewish Mary: a woman of enormous courage, strength, and prayer. In restoring Mary to her own time and place, she helps us rediscover Mary’s message for our own time.

¹See William H. Halsey, *The Survival of American Innocence: Catholicism in an Era of Disillusionment 1920-1940* (Notre Dame, Indiana: University of Notre Dame Press, 1980).

²James J. Walsh, *The Thirteenth: The Greatest of Centuries* (New York: Fordham University Press, 1943).

³Portions of this section were previously published in Mary Christine Athan’s article, “Mary in the American Catholic Church.”

⁴Thomas A. Kselman and Stevan Avella, “Marian Piety and the Cold War in the United States,” *Catholic Historical Review* 72, no. 3 (July 1986): 403–24.

⁵Kselman and Avella, 419.

⁶Caryll Houselander, *The Reed of God* (Westminster, MD: Christian Classics, 1944, 1985), comment on back cover.

⁷Houselander, 28.

⁸Richard P. McBrien, *Catholicism*, 2 vols., rev. ed. (San Francisco: HarperSanFrancisco, 1994), Vol. II, 881.

⁹As quoted in Cunneen, 238.

¹⁰Kevin J. Madigan and Jon D. Levenson, *Resurrection: The Power of God for Christians and Jews* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 2008), xi.

¹¹Edward Schillebeeckx and Catherina Halkes, *Mary: Yesterday, Today, Tomorrow*, trans. John Bowden (New York: Crossroad, 1993), 17–19.

¹²George Tavard, *The Thousand Faces of Mary* (Collegeville, MN: Liturgical Press, 1996), 203.

¹³*Lumen Gentium* 53, in *Vatican II: Conciliar and Post-Conciliar Documents*, ed. Austin Flannery, ed., *Vatican II: Conciliar and Post-Conciliar Documents* (New York: Costello, 1975).

¹⁴Anthony J. Tambasco, *What Are They Saying About Mary?* (New York: Paulist Press, 1984), 9.

¹⁵Tavard, 205.

¹⁶Schillebeeckx and Halkes, 15.

MARY OF NAZARETH



The Historical Mary

Note: The following is a transcript of the FutureChurch teleconference with Sr. Elizabeth Johnson, CSJ: "Will the Real Mary Please Stand Up?" To listen to recordings of this and all FutureChurch teleconferences, go to www.futurechurch.org/podcasts.



Will the Real Mary Please Stand Up? presented by Sister Elizabeth Johnson, CSJ

Thank you, Deb, and thank you, Russ. And good evening, everyone scattered across the many states where I was listening that you all have come from. It's a great pleasure for me to join you tonight and to be discussing with you this question, as it was originally put, Will the Real Mary Please Stand Up?

I would pose the question this way, perhaps. As we go forward in the 21st century, what would be a theologically sound, spiritually empowering, and ethically challenging theology of Mary? What would be the best way that we could honor her? Obviously she lived in the first century, a Jewish woman in Roman-occupied Galilee. But because she gave birth to Jesus, confessed as Emmanuel, God with us, later centuries gave her the profound title of Mother of God. Theotokos, in the original Greek, or the God-bearer, and technically, the one who was heavy with God.

You know, she's arguably the most celebrated woman in the Christian tradition, and you could not count the paintings and sculptures, icons, the prayers and music, poetry and feasts, the spiritual writings, theology and doctrines, churches, schools and hospitals named after her, and so on.

Elizabeth Johnson, a member of the Sisters of Saint Joseph of Brentwood, is Distinguished Professor of Theology at Fordham University.

So the question before us, I think, is what do we say in our time, in our multicultural world in this generation? Who is she, and how can we carry forward this rich tradition of honoring Mary in a way that is liberating and healing in a world so in need? That's the question, right?

Now, what I'm going to propose, and have proposed in the books that they've mentioned, is just one answer. There are other ways; not claiming exclusivity for this. But I am proposing that we approach Mary as a real historical woman, someone who walked faithfully with her God during her own life's journey and who now, joined to the rest of us in the great communion of saints, encourages our faithful discipleship in our own time and place.

Let me point out that this is a very different approach from a great deal of the tradition, which ended up putting Mary, in the end, on a pedestal for better and for worse. For better, she was there as protector and comforter for so many people in need. But for worse, she became more and more distant from the actual person that she was. And frankly, many women today find that image intensely unappealing and have rejected it.

But my suggestion is that we could relieve her of her historic burden at this point and let her be free to be herself, and rejoin us in the communion of saints.

So this is not a simple question: How can we best think of her and approach her and honor her?

I'd like to point out that there are at least two approaches in the past that I am not going to follow. One of them is the approach that considers Mary the maternal face of God. Now, early in Christian history, there is ample evidence that the Mediterranean people, who had no problem worshiping the great mother goddess, transferred a great deal of that imagery, the titles, and the shrines, over to Mary. People today say Christians baptized this pagan imagery. And it was a successful missionary strategy [because] it allowed Christianity to attract people who were accustomed to female deities, whereas Christianity itself prayed only to God as Father, Son, and Spirit in a more masculine way.

But ever since, and you can track this, there has been a tendency to transfer divine qualities to Mary, especially in periods when theology was deficient. So in the Middle Ages, for example, as Christ became more and more judgmental—you see this in the art of time—Mary became more and more merciful, the one you could pray to to help you when Christ, even, was going to judge you.

Now, her gender as a woman and her historical role as a mother played no small part in these developments, for what compassionate mother would let one of her children be lost? So through the centuries, as the god of Christianity became more and more masculine and more and more judgmental, Mary's function came to reveal God's love as close and compassionate, trustworthy and attractive, something that gets lost from view when the prevailing notion of God is that of an authority figure.

Now, this can explain some of the exaggeration that has crept into the Marian tradition over the years.

We still have this going on. For example, in Brazil, Leonardo Boff, the theologian of liberation, has written an entire book entitled, the Maternal Face of God. And his argument is, just as the second person of the blessed trinity became incarnate in the male Jesus, the third person of the blessed trinity, the Holy Spirit, became embodied in Mary. And so we have a gender balance, then, going on.

But the problem with this is, first of all, it's not generally very unorthodox. But secondly, Mary is not divine; she's a human being. It's completely losing track of herself as a woman. You could say that that whole development shows how capable the nature of women is to carry forward images of God in female form. But my suggestion—I have put this this way—let these images of God in female form migrate back to their source. Let God have her own maternal face.

The Australian theologian, Patricia Fox, demonstrated this when she wrote an article entitled, Mother of Mercy: Reclaiming a Title for God. So you might want to question that or think about that in our period later on. If we keep God totally masculine and forget the diversity of images of God in the Bible, both feminine as well as cosmic, and that none of them can be taken literally, then all of this feminine imagery has to go somewhere. And it was Mary who treasured these in her own image and likeness through the centuries.

But my suggestion is that we could relieve her of her historic burden at this point and let her be free to be herself, and rejoin us in the communion of saints.

The other approach that I am also, in a sense, saying, is probably not a very fruitful approach, especially in light of women's experience today, is the approach, then, sees her as the ideal feminine person, or a symbol of the feminine. And those who take this approach invariably divide male and female natures into water-tight compartments. Sometimes this is called complementarity.

And so masculine nature equips men for leadership in the public realm because it is marked by reason-ability and assertiveness, independence, and the ability to make decisions. And on the other hand, feminine nature fits women for the private life of child-bearing and home-making and caring for the vulnerable, because it is characterized by relationality, gentleness, nurturing, a non-assertive attitude, and a willingness to give service.

Now, I don't know, again, what you think—and this is, in a way, controversial—but I know men who are gentle and nurturing and give wonderful service, and I know women who are intelligent and assertive and can lead. And so our experience today in the world does not fit these categories, and yet this is what has, in fact, again, made Mary very unattractive to many women.

Let me give you an example here and then I'll finish these two negative points. The Swiss theologian Hans Urs von Balthasar, speaking of Mary, says that in the Church, there was a Miriam principle compared and complementary to the Petrine principle. The Miriam principle is one of holy obedience. The Petrine principle is one of hierarchical rule, and they go together.

And this Miriam principle indicates,

he says, that women ought to divest themselves of their self-will in order to be obedient to the word of God, as articulated by the male hierarchy. And his prime example there is Mary and the wedding feast, Cana. He says, "You notice the lack of wine, and rather than deal with the lack of wine, on her own initiative, she performed an act of self-emptying by turning to Jesus for help." And he comments, and I quote, "As a woman, she has her heart where it ought to be and not in her brain."

Well, one could argue back that she noticed the lack of wine, and rather than commit an act of self-emptying, she took initiative, approached Jesus, and when he wasn't willing to do something because his hour had not yet come, she nudged him until she got him to do it. One could go on in this vein. She says, "The servants do whatever he tells you," and before you know it the wine is flowing again. So she doesn't fit that gender stereotype if you actually read the texts in which she appears.

But many women's negative reaction to Mary today stems from the realization that this feminine ideal functions as an obstacle to personal growth, preventing the development of a critical intellect, capacity for righteous anger, and other characteristics of a mature personality. So the question is, what is a woman and who gets to decide? And my suggestion is that we leave aside this gender dualism in approaching Mary for our own day. I think that becomes a bit of a dead end, although there are certainly people who would disagree with me about that.

So what shall we do? If I can repeat what I said earlier on, if we interpret Mary as a real historical woman

who walked faithfully with her God during her life's journey and who joined, through the Church, in the great community of saints, encourages our faithful discipleship in our own time and place.

There's a beautiful expression of Pope Paul VI that gave the title to my book on this subject, and I was so pleased when I found it. He wrote of Mary, "She is indeed truly our sister who, as a poor and humble woman, fully shared our lot." And this approach that in a way gives her back her own life or lets her take it back herself, invites her to come down from the pedestal and take her place amongst us as an actual poor person who responded to the spirit in her life in the midst of very troubled times, and who now joins us in our pilgrimage toward God.

Obviously this approach is centered in Scripture in the passages in the New Testament in which Mary appears or speaks or acts. And we have a great deal of help in surfacing what her life might have been like as an historical person from all the work that's been done in recent decades on the quest for the historical Jesus.

And scholars have dug up Nazareth. They have found what it was like to live in that little hamlet with a focus on Jesus. And I'm saying, yes, but also he had a family, as his mother was there. So we can picture her in that small village of about three to four hundred people, which was so poor that it had no paved roads, no public buildings, no inscriptions, which indicates that most of the populace was illiterate. No glass, no perfume bottles—the kinds of things that archaeologists dig up in wealthier settings.

And in this small village, she lived



“The Magnificat: Proclaiming the God of the Marginalized” by Laura James. © 2015 by FutureChurch.

out her life with her husband and her family—most people lived in extended families at that point—and responded to God’s call to her. We owe a debt, I believe, to third-world women who have spotted the similarity of Mary’s life to their lives. A peasant woman, a poor woman of the people, struggling against state power that was very oppressive and violent. It’s how she lost her first-born son—through state torture and crucifixion—and continuously faithful to God throughout her life, as so many women in our own world today.

I continue to go back to the scholarship of the first world, looking at the political violence, the economic poverty, the cultural disenfranchisement that she would have known as a human being. She was, if I may put it very bluntly, a

nobody on the world stage. And it is to this woman that God approached with the invitation to mother the Messiah, and it is this woman who stepped up to the plate with all the power of her spirit, rejoicing in God and responding wholeheartedly.

Let me stay with that notion for a minute, because there is a text in the New Testament that for centuries, when you read traditional Mariology, is overlooked. And that text is the Magnificat, or Mary’s Canticle—Canticle of Justice, in Luke, Chapter 1—and she sings. And it’s interesting to note that the setting for this song is Mary, who is newly pregnant, [beading?] with her older kinswoman, Elizabeth, who’s also pregnant but further along. And where they meet is Elizabeth’s home.

But something is different about this

domestic space, because Zechariah, Elizabeth’s husband and head of household, has been struck dumb. No other men are around, and so the male voice is quiet, which is very unusual in Scripture. This is a rare vignette where women are the main actors who hold center stage. And empowered by each other’s presence, they fill this space with blessing and strong prophetic words.

Filled with the spirit, Elizabeth blesses Mary and her child. And then in line with the great biblical singers, Miriam, Deborah, and Hannah, Mary blesses God. This prayer is the longest set of words placed on the lips of any woman in the New Testament. It’s the most that any woman gets to say.

And what she says is magnificent. First, she magnifies the Lord with all her spirit, which rejoices in God, her

Savior, because lowly woman though she is, the Holy one is doing great things for her—and not for her only, but for all the poor and needy. And then in short forceful phrases, she declares the work of God, who puts down the mighty from their thrones, exalts the lowly, fills the hungry with good things, but sends the rich away empty. And the prayer ends by her saying, all this is being done to fulfill the ancient promise of mercy.

But newly pregnant with the Messiah, Mary is singing here of the approach of the kingdom of God that Jesus would inaugurate. I have always loved the comment of the German theologian, Diedrich Bonhoeffer, about this hymn. He calls it the most passionate, the wildest advent hymn ever sung.

And I quote him: “This is not the gentle, tender, dreamy Mary who we sometimes see in paintings. It is the passionate, the rendered proud, enthusiastic Mary who speaks out here. This song has none of the sweet, nostalgic tones of some of our Christmas carols. It is instead a hard, strong, inexorable song about collapsing thrones and humble lords of this world, about the power of God who comes to save. These are the tones of the women prophets of the Old Testament that now come to life in Mary’s mouth.”

Gathered in Singapore, Asian feminist theologians that with a mother like this, it is little wonder that Jesus’s first words in Luke’s Gospel proclaims his passion for healing the broken-hearted and setting captives free. And as they comment, the apple does not fall far from the tree.

Step back and look at this hymn. You know that exploited people in every society hear a blessing in Mary’s song—those who struggle against

poverty, racism, domestic violence, war, and other social structures that demean their human dignity. Here, in Mary’s words, is the hope that God intends something more for their life. And rather than spiritualizing this hope and postponing it until the end of time, Mary’s Canticle proclaims God’s merciful action is coming now to disrupt the arrogant social order—even here, even now.

One African theologian wrote, (Peter Daino, *Mary, Mother of Sorrows, Mother of Defiance*. Orbis Books, 1993.) “Imagine the world according to the defiant Mary’s Magnificat—peace breaking out, racial justice prevailing, immigrants welcomed, women treated as fully human persons, and all the children fed.” This hymn, I think, still has to make its way into the consciousness of the Church today and let these identify the revolutionary attitude that Mary had in this world and that we are called also to share.

Now, many other texts in the New Testament, over the dozen where Mary appears, we could interpret in this light. She is a real person, a poor woman, a woman who suffered violence in her own family, and yet her understanding of God’s ways in the world stand out as this tremendous challenge to the Church even today.

If we keep going like this and approach Mary on the avenue of historical memory, what we are basically doing is reawakening the understanding that she is part of the communion of saints. And so in this last part of my presentation before we get to discussion, I’d like to just dwell on what that means.

Some people find this very strange to think of her as a saint, and yet we call many churches and schools ‘St. Mary’s.’ And being a saint is no small

Step back and look at this hymn. You know that exploited people in every society hear a blessing in Mary’s song—those who struggle against poverty, racism, domestic violence, war, and other social structures that demean their human dignity.

And so we see Mary and the saints in this companionship model not between God and ourselves on earth, but alongside of us as sisters and brothers in Christ.

thing. What it means is, as the Holy Spirit graces people in land after land all through the ages, together they form a great company of friends of Gods and prophets to call, quote, “the Book of Wisdom,” a community of holy people endeavoring to live their lives praising God.

Now, as we know, this community encircles the globe in space and includes everyone who is alive today responding to the grace of the Spirit. But it also reaches backward in time to include those who have died and now live in the embrace of God. The communion of saints is a very strongly hopeful doctrine in which we say, that doesn’t end your participation in the grace of the Holy Spirit, which weaves us all into one great communion.

But, now, once we admit Mary into our company as this first century Jewish woman of faith, the question of how to relate to her arises. And I think here is the other part, Part 2, of my proposal. Part 1 is, take her as a real woman of history. Part 2 is, relate to her as a companion rather than as a patron.

In the more traditional approach, Mary and the saints, too, are approached primarily as intercessors before the throne of God. Behind this way of praying, we imagine that God exists like a king ruling in splendor with courtiers ranked in descending order of importance. And we, of course, are way down at the bottom, very far from the distant throne. And so, as the saying goes, we need friends in high places to intercede for our cause and obtain spiritual and material blessings.

And because she is the mother of the Lord, Mary is THE most powerful intercessor of all, obtaining gifts that might otherwise be denied. Now, it’s

interesting to note that this patron/client relationship is not found in the New Testament, nor is it found in the early Christian centuries of the martyrs. It developed in the late Roman empire under the influence of the civil patronage system once the Church had been officially established.

The earlier way in the New Testament and the Age of the Martyrs of relating the living to the dead saw us all as companions to each other in the one spirit-filled community. And so we see Mary and the saints in this companionship model not between God and ourselves on earth, but alongside of us as sisters and brothers in Christ.

The text in the New Testament—from the letter to the Hebrews, especially—Chapter XII, Verse 1—and to telling the story of so many faithful Jewish ancestors, Hebrews XII concludes, “Therefore, since we are surrounded by so great a crowd of witnesses, let us rid ourselves of every burden and sin that clings to us, and persevere in running the race that lies before us, while keeping our eyes fixed on Jesus, a pioneer and perfecter of our faith.”

Now, biblical scholars note that the image here is that of the stadium. And at one time those who went before us were down on the track running the race, but now they are up in the stands as a great cloud of witnesses cheering us on in our own effort to be faithful.

St. Augustine preached in the same vein, “When we pay honor to the martyrs, we are honoring the friends of Christ who are also our friends following after the same love.” So in this model, the model of companionship, the main way of approach is by mutuality, by



Fresco of the Wedding Feast at Cana. Melkite Church of the Annunciation, Jerusalem.

Image (cropped) by See The Holy Land, CC BY-SA 2.0, via Wikimedia Commons.

connections with the struggles and the witness of the life of the person we're honoring, and bringing their memory into our own lives as a spark to our own actions and to our own fidelity.

This approach is very strong. If I may give you this example, in Latin America, especially in El Salvador, when the village people recite the traditional litany of the saints, they add the names of their own martyrs for the cause of justice. And instead of saying, "Pray for us," they say, "Presente," meaning 'Be here with us,' or 'You are here with us.' So, "[name] presente," "[name], presente," "[name] presente," and so on. As Augustine says, each martyred life inspires the next generation the way one fire kindles another.

Now, I'm suggesting that within this great cloud of witnesses, if we

approach Miriam of Nazareth this way, we will we will reap enormous benefits. A woman of faith who heard the word of God and kept it, partnering God in the great work of redemption. And while the precise circumstances of her actual life can never be repeated, the style and spirit of her life reverberates through the centuries to propel us in today's very different cultural context.

And in solidarity with her spirit, we find strength to face up to our own challenges to the best of our faithful [wit]. We can say, "Miriam of Nazareth, presente. Be here with us. Walk with us on our journey, cheer us on, help us out, and inside we'll be up in the stands, then, cheering for others.

There's so much more to say. I have my eye on the clock. I have two more minutes, I know. So I would like to conclude with an example, again,

of how this would work, going back to the wedding feast of Cana with a different approach from Hans Urs von Balthasar.

As you know, the wine ran out. A typically poor family in a small village; many people present. Mary noticed, says to Jesus, "They have no wine." Just remember those words: "They have no wine." And despite his hesitation, she nudges him to do something. And the result is extravagant. Six water jars, each with a capacity of 20-plus gallons, filled with excellent wine.

As we know, the wedding banquet is often used in the Bible to symbolize those heart-stopping moments, when the Messiah will come, when justice will be done on Earth as it is in heaven. And in this wedding scene, the wine, more than 100 gallons of it, signifies the abundant gift of salvation being joyfully poured out

*Women in poor nations
hear her say, “They
have no wine.” And
they elaborate: “Nor no
food, no clean drinking
water, no housing,
education, or health
care; no freedom or
political power, no
security from rape, no
human rights.*

by the presence of Christ.

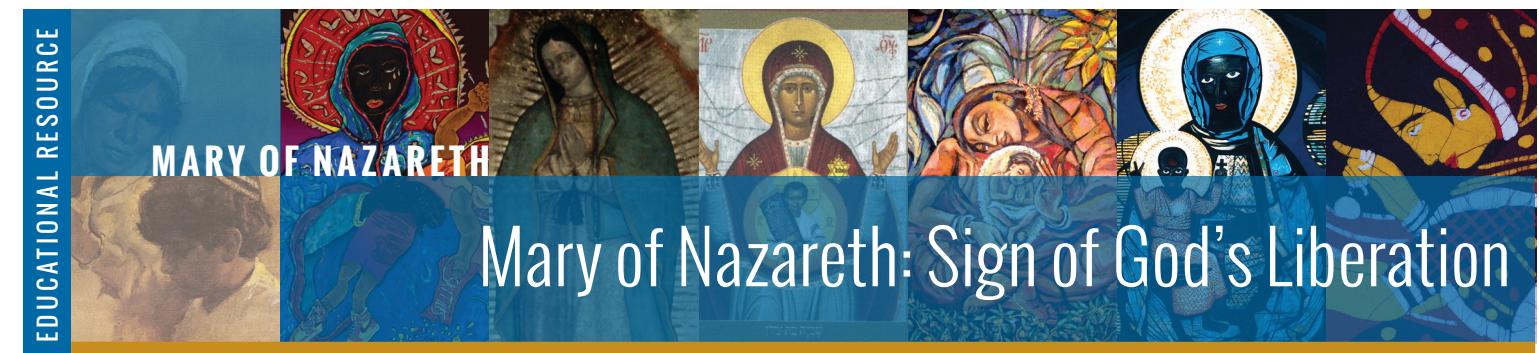
But let us not lose sight of Mary, what she has done here. Her words at the wedding reverberate prophetically down through the centuries, imploring neediness and announcing hope. Women in poor nations hear her say, “They have no wine.” And they elaborate: “Nor no food, no clean drinking water, no housing, education, or health care; no freedom or political power, no security from rape, no human rights.

Mary stands among the marginalized, herself a member of the group without wine, and speaks the hope of the needy. Her strong, compassionate impulse to call for relief corresponds to God’s own desire to spread the hospitality of life on earth. And just as her words propel Jesus into action at [Cana], her challenge now addresses the Church, the body of Christ—Christ in the world today, especially in first-world nations—and even though we might rather not be informed, she says to us, “They have no wine. You have to act.”

So I conclude simply by saying, far from being a peripheral approach, basing our understanding of Mary on who she was in her own life as a real historical woman and connecting with her through the power of the Spirit and the communion of saints liberates energies for the life of discipleship today. Finding that she walks with us, we can carry the spark of the Gospel to a world in need and inspire the next generation. Mariam of Nazareth, presente.

Thank you.

MARY OF NAZARETH



Mary of Nazareth: Sign of God's Liberation

FutureChurch



"The Magnificat: Proclaiming the God of the Marginalized" by Laura James.

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Mary of Nazareth: Sign of God's Liberation

by Christine Schenk, CSJ

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

Mary in the Christian Scriptures

The scriptures themselves tell us very little about Mary as a historical figure. Paul refers to her only once, and then not by name in Galatians 4:4: "*When the time had fully come, God sent forth his Son, born of a woman, born under the law.*" References to Mary by name appear in the Gospels and the Acts of the Apostles. Matthew's infancy narrative (Mt 1:1-17)

makes Joseph the central figure, not Mary, and treats the virgin birth more ambivalently than Luke. Biblical scholars have made much of Matthew's naming four unconventional women, Tamar (Gen 38:6-30; 1 Chr 2:3-6), Rahab (Josh 2:1-24; 6:1-2, 15-25), Ruth (The Book of Ruth), and Bathsheba (2 Sam 11:1-18, 25-27; 12:1-25; 1 Kings 1:1, 11-40; 2:13-25; 1 Chr 3:5) in Jesus' genealogy. Their inclusion sets the stage for his recognition that sinners and outsiders are also chosen for God's saving work in history and for the unusual circumstances surrounding Jesus' birth[17].

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

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

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

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

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

Safe Feminine Role Model

Since historical references to Mary in the scriptures are sparse how did she become so prominent in the Catholic imagination? In *Mary, the Feminine Face of the Church*, Rosemary Ruether compares the biblical Mary with Mary of Magdala and the other women disciples who play a central and sometimes unconventional role in the synoptic Gospels.

These women remain at Jesus' side at his death and burial while the men flee. The first witness of the Resurrection was not Mary, Jesus' mother, but Magdalen, with the other women. There is much New Testament evidence about the role of Magdalen and the other women disciples yet church tradition has glorified Mary, Jesus' mother, as the faithful

woman who stayed loyally at his side. Ruether believes that the role of Mary of Magdala was suppressed because she presented a model for women that later Church leaders wanted to ignore. She says "*By replacing Mary Magdalene with Mary, the mother as the 'woman who loved him,' the Church replaced a dangerously unconventional role model with a conventional role model and relationship.*" [16]

The Cult of Mary

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

Medieval Europe saw a growing emphasis on the doctrine of God's judgment. Christ was seen as the all-just judge and supreme ruler. It was also a high point

in the history of Mariology. Psalms were rewritten substituting the name of Mary for God and feasts, relics, works of art and cathedrals dedicated to Mary multiplied dramatically. Her merciful intercession would surely plead a sinful people's case before her Son's stern throne of judgment.[9]

Icon of She Who Is

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

"Mary has been an icon of God. For innumerable believers she has functioned to reveal a divine love as merciful, close, interested, always ready to hear and respond to human needs, trustworthy and profoundly attractive, and has done so to a degree not possible when one thinks of God simply as a ruling male person or persons. Consequently, in devotion to her as a compassionate Mother who will not let one of her children be lost, what is actually being mediated is a most appealing experience of God [7]."

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

Feminist thinkers have long said that unconscious sexism in doctrinal development led to an over-idealization of the concept of woman in the abstract at the expense of dealing with flesh and blood women. Ann Carr believes that

“the theology of Mary and her image in the Church may ultimately tell us more about the Church than about Mary.” [4] Thus it has been possible to glorify Mary as ever virgin/ever-Mother and hold her up as an impossible feminine model, while at the same time ignoring the oppression of real women.

Jewish Mother of Jesus

And what of the historical Mary of Nazareth? Is it possible to discover the “real Mary” beneath theological projections? Elizabeth Johnson says the following historical facts about Mary find agreement among biblical scholars: Mary was a first century Jewish woman who was the mother of Jesus. She did not follow Jesus as a disciple during his ministry in Palestine nor understand his mission to any great extent (Mark 3: 21-35). However, Luke (in Acts 1:14) tells us that she did come to share the faith of the early Christian community and became a believer, a fact agreed upon by an ecumenical task force of scripture scholars[12]. As Johnson says: *“Mary was the Jewish mother of Jesus who misunderstood and then believed.”* [12] I would add three other probable facts to Johnson’s list. The first is that Mary raised her son in Galilee where Jewish families were losing their ancestral lands because of exorbitant taxation by Rome and its minions, such as Herod Antipas, among the religious leadership. [7,8] The second is that the historical circumstances surrounding Jesus’ birth may have been unconventional [17]. Third, it is likely that at least some of Jesus’ understanding of God’s power to save came from his Jewish mother who taught him about the liberating God of the Hebrew Scriptures.

Magnificat Mother of the One Who Saves

While the lack of historical data may make it impossible to know much about

Mary, the woman from Nazareth, it is not at all impossible to reflect on the biblical narrative in ways that constitute good news for present day women and men. For example, Mary has been addressed in contemporary litanies as “marginalized woman” “unwed mother,” “refugee woman with child,” “mother of a political prisoner,” “widowed mother,” “mother of an executed criminal,” “breaker of bondage,” “seeker of sanctuary” and other similar titles (14).

I think it no accident that Luke’s infancy narrative places the Magnificat in the mouth of Mary. According to biblical scholar Raymond Brown the Magnificat was composed neither by Mary nor by Luke but originated among the Jewish Christian converts of Jerusalem who adapted the prayer of Hannah (1 Sam 2:1-11) These Jerusalem Christians were members of the *anawim* (“poor ones”). This name came to refer to those who could not trust in their own strength but had to rely upon God (widows, orphans, the sick, etc). The opposite of the *anawim* were not only the rich, but the proud and self -sufficient who believed they had no need of God.[1]

For Rosemary Ruether, Mary “becomes a theological agent in her own right” [16] because in proclaiming the Magnificat she becomes the embodiment of Israel and cooperates with God to bring about the redemption of the remnant (*anawim*). Catherina Halkes notes that in the liberation theology of Latin America, the Magnificat “has been used as a source of inspiration to give concrete form to the messianic reality and structural relationships.” [6] She and Ruether agree that a Mariology interpreted in light of the Magnificat can form an important link between feminist and liberation theologies. To Halkes, Mary does not express joy to her cousin Elizabeth because she is pregnant,



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

(Luke 1: 46-50)

True discipleship for women and men means exposing the Church's scriptural, institutional and theological modes of oppression, and acting to change unjust limitations imposed by our own religious heritage.

but rather: “glorifies God's liberating action precisely because she is herself the liberated Israel: those of low degree who are exalted. Her Magnificat is as it were, a prelude in radical subversive language to Luke's Sermon on the Plain and the opening address of Jesus in Luke 4.” [6]

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

Unjust structures, in the Church or in society, are not corrected without first confronting the religious thinking that

believes the status quo is the design of God. Attempts to “demythologize” and then “remythologize” Mary can help present day believers take heart in their own struggles to follow the way of Jesus in proclaiming the realm of God. Perhaps the woman from Nazareth can proclaim the Magnificat ways of God precisely because she is lowly. Perhaps it is from this place that both men and women best recognize Whose power it is that “casts the mighty from their thrones and raises up the lowly.” In Elizabeth Johnson's words, we now see Mary “as our ‘sister’ in faith who reveals to women their own real resources... [who] as a real woman with much to contend with...gave herself to her life and to her God, in her own time and place and way...She is one of the cloud of witnesses (Heb 11-12) whose story encourages our own faith...”[11]

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MARY OF NAZARETH



FutureChurch



Reclaiming Mary: A Task for Feminist Theology

by Mary C. Grey

Mariology is certainly the area in which angels and feminists alike fear to tread.¹ Yet the very integrity of the feminist theological enterprise itself, which is deeply committed to the uncovering of theological truth forces us to put ‘an end to running’.² However, when faced with the Marian tradition, the danger of drowning in themes, motifs, uncovering layer after layer of doctrinal/devotional/sociological and cultural connections, psychological undercurrents, ecumenical battlefields, stereotypical role-models, the novelist’s flights of fantasy, the feminist wishful thinking, is very real. Is there such a thing as Mariological truth? Is there any way of cutting through the undergrowth, the accretions of centuries? This paper will attempt, first, to summarize the different approaches to Mariology within the Christian tradition; secondly, to work out a feminist critical principle to Mariology, and thirdly, to suggest guidelines towards one possible contemporary feminist theology of Mary.

Part 1: Who is Mary in the Christian tradition?

In his recent book *The maternal face of God*³ Leonardo Boff gives seven key positions on Mary, (his own being an eighth). I will briefly summarize these, to give an idea, not just of their complexity, but to show the issues which feminist theology must face.

1. The Marian scholar, Rene Laurentin, suggests that,

We cannot know God’s secret plan for Mary. We can only set out humbly all the events of salvation. Mary is, then, the bridge of the Old and New Testaments. Her virginity, motherhood, participation in Jesus’s life and death, her own death and assumption into heaven and continuing presence among God’s people are all part of God’s mysterious plan.⁴

But, we have to ask, are we to have no reflection on what this means?

2. This is the position adopted by the Second Vatican Council, (*Lumen gentium*). Mary is the woman in the service of others-of God, Christ, the Church, redemption-and the ultimate meaning of history. She has *no* theological meaning of her own: she is co-redemptrix, co-mediatrix, prototype of Church, full of grace *after* Christ; she is the symbol of new being, she recapitulates eschatological history inaugurated by Christ. Boff himself regards this as *impoverished theology*. As women we know how harmful this interpretation has been for us. As the inferior ‘other’, so well described by Simone de Beauvoir, autonomous personhood has been beyond our grasp and Mary has been used to justify this view.

3. What we know as the classic Mariological approach: *the motherhood of Mary* is the classic unifying principle of all the Marian events. All her mysteries revolve around this. Her motherhood is also *virginal* and as Virgin Mother she is part of the salvific process of *all* humanity.

4. Mariology follows Christology: Christ's whole salvific reality will be Mary's, by participation and derivation. This is *part* of the justification of the Immaculate Conception tradition-it also prohibits us from knowing, 'Who is Mary for herself?'

5. Mary is the prototype of the Church. She is co-redemptrix *par excellence*, total sacrament of salvation-just as the Church is called to unity with Christ, so Mary is one body, one life, one love with Christ. Eventually Mary becomes spouse of the Spirit. This, as Boff points out, idealizes and de-historicizes Church as well as blurring Mary's function in relation to Church.

6. This sees Mary in the context of the Nicene Creed-Mary is the believer. This is a popular approach for ecumenism. All the dogmas of faith are placed on the lips of Mary and are a reflection of *her* place in God's salvific plan. This is a useful starting point for dialogue, but does not address the core of Mariology.

7. Mary is the way to study salvation history. (This is again an approach favoured by Vatican II). How is Mary part of the divine economy of salvation? But this view of salvation history ignores the arena of worldhistory, inter-faith dialogue that is Mary's significance *outside* the Judaeo-Christian background.

8. Boff's own approach is based on his understanding of human nature as the reciprocity between masculine and feminine, on Mary as representative of the feminine principle, as being ontologically connected with the Holy Spirit, just as, he says, the masculine principle is connected with Christ.⁶ The feminist difficulties with this position are enormous.

difficulties with Mariology. Clearly, the principal difficulty is because Mary has been used in Christian spirituality as icon, ideal and role-model for *all* women: the ideal has been that of virgin-mother, which is an impossible one for ordinary women to follow.

Secondly, the patriarchal interpretation of the virginal motherhood of Mary has been inadequate -- even disastrous -- for the understanding of woman's sexuality: it has encouraged the understanding of sexuality's purpose as principally procreative and has glorified the vocation of woman as that of motherhood in both biological and spiritual senses. Not only that, but Mary's motherhood is described as 'The one spotless womb wherein Jesus was laid', as an extremely well-known hymn puts it. Although this belongs to the mediaeval symbolizing of Mary as receptacle, as Holy Grail of God's redeeming grace, it has had its de-personalizing consequences in much of gynaecological practice today, as Adrienne Rich has so brilliantly described.⁷ Thirdly, when we combine this with the notion of Eternal Woman, (immortalized by Goethe's *Faust*), of whom Mary, Queen of Heaven is the quintessence, the Jungian archetype of the idealized feminine, we can see that Mariology has served as a stumbling block towards the discovery and achievement of self-affirmation for real women.

Many of us can recount similar convent girlhood experiences to the struggles of, for example, Antonia White, Marina Warner, Mary McCarthy, to emulate the purity of Immaculate Mary, and to serve unseen, as supposedly Mary did, in the hidden Nazareth years. How, then, do we reclaim Mary?

The danger is that we, too, will fall into the hermeneutical trap. Filled with the desire to reclaim Mary for the feminist liberation process, imbued with our slogans 'sisterhood is powerful', 'the person is political', we return to the gospel narratives and tradition,

moulding them to our own purpose, seeing in them what we want to find. Thus the Annunciation and conception of Jesus could become prototypical of lesbian motherhood, ('Alone I did it'), the lack of a need for a man in the whole conception and birthing process; the visitation with Elizabeth becomes an illustration of 'Sisterhood is powerful'. If we do this we fall into exactly the same trap as everyone else, using Mary and Marian symbols to suit our particular needs. Is there a way out of the circle? Bearing in mind that, just as we have Jesus and Christology, so we have Mary and Mariology, I will sketch some modest aims.

Our hope is, first, to discover who is Mary for herself. So we push aside such approaches as Mary, symbol of the Church, redeemed humanity, ideal woman, perfection of motherhood, and so on. Relational language about Mary, as Catherine Halkes has pointed out,⁸ will forever keep woman as the passive, inferior other! We have to reclaim relational language itself. Seen from the perspective of right relation, of justice in relationship, we know that relationships must respect two poles-the integrity and self-affirmation of the person, as well as that of interdependence and intersubjectivity.

Secondly, we have to resist the temptation to fantasize with the texts; so, in what sense can androcentric texts be used for Marian truth? How can we relate *positively* to the very rich symbols given by the tradition for example, of Mother, *Mater Dolorosa*, Virgin, Queen of Heaven, mediatrix, defender of oppressed women, Mary, delight of creation? Our foundational principle sees the God of Jesus Christ as creating, saving and liberating both men and women. As Rosemary Ruether has said, 'Whatever diminishes the full personhood of women is rejected as not redemptive'.⁹ That must be our starting point.

Thirdly, our feminist critical scholarship has done much to reclaim female language and image for God.

Part II: Towards a feminist critical principle

First, the question must be faced as to why women experience such

Wisdom language, Spirit language, Goddess language, female experiences *all* contribute to our God image. This is very liberating for Mary. It removes the whole burden of history from her if she does not have to be the symbol of female divinity excluded by the characterization of God as male. This does not mean that she cannot function symbolically as the evocation of the divine female present in every woman.

Fourthly, the whole wisdom of Christian feminist spirituality must be brought into play. Because we know spirituality is about whole persons we reject any interpretation of Mary which *de-personalizes* her, either as passive receptacle, or sees her within the dualistic split between body/soul/spirit. The qualities of openness, receptivity, sensitivity and attentiveness are qualities of the whole person, qualities of Christian discipleship, of believing men and women. Spirituality is about wholeness, connectedness, our affirmation and celebration of ourselves as God's good creation, with a corresponding denunciation of anything which blocks this.

Part III: Towards a contemporary Marian theology

This will be sketched both within the context of liberation theology as developed by Fiorenza, Ruether and Halkes, and also within the context of Process Philosophy.¹⁰ This, briefly, means that God and world are mutually affected by each other: each contributes to the becoming of the other. The first insight gained from looking at the texts from a feminist critical liberationist hermeneutic is that Mary is a woman of strength, independence, of integrity, of autonomous action. (This has already been developed by Mary Daly, in *Beyond God the Father*).

Secondly, because of the particular strengths of women's spirituality, which believes in solidarity, mutuality and power-in-sharing, we see Mary *together with* other women who were also open

to the divine, participants in creating/saving action. It is normal to associate Mary with Elizabeth, mother of a special child, Hannah, chosen to be mother of a child of promise. But Mary is also linked with Miriam, who led the dance of liberation, not only with the wives of patriarchs, (Sarah, Rebecca and Rachel), but with Hagar, rejected and thrown into the wilderness, the *first* mother of a promised child, with Leah, the rejected sister, with Ruth, a woman independent of patriarchy in her sense of relating. The issue forces itself upon us: whom has God chosen? Not the powerful, the status-conscious, but again and again, the woman whose power is of a very different nature, often woman whose distinguishing characteristic is to be from a despised race-Hagar the Egyptian, Ruth the Moabitess, the Samaritan woman at the well, the Syro-Phoenician woman. What is the significance in God's eyes of being the outcast, the marginalized and on the fringes?

Thirdly, we can reclaim the motherhood of Mary from unworthy patriarchal connotations. As I have explained, the reason for our anxiety are the implications that *all* women should be mothers, that femaleness is defined by motherhood, that women have been degraded as breeding-machines, that female sexuality is similarly defined as geared solely to child-bearing, or ordered for women to be the play object for men, and that childbirth, too, has been manipulated by modern medicine- 'our birthing energies have been taken from us', as Mary Daly says. The question is, can we see the motherhood of Mary as free, active cooperation in redemption?

If we can view the whole action of redemption as relational and creative, (as the Process model allows us), creation and redemption as one action, then *birthing* energies are *saving* energies. Openness and vulnerability are the pre-requisites. 'Compassion', says Carter Heyward,¹¹ 'begins in the soil of our vulnerability'. But it is vulnerability seen as *strength, not*

weakness, -- it is strength to 'bear up God in the world', as the literal meaning of compassion tells us. And this is exactly what Mary does: Mary is open and vulnerable, the essential prerequisites for divine creative/redemptive action-which is why she is so inspirational for us. 'Bearing up the divine in the world' is the task of all Christians, the creative, redemptive and transforming task. And God is vulnerable too: God needs the openness, the vulnerability of God-bearers to achieve fullness, delight and happiness-which is God's justice for the world. It is possible that both the evangelists, and the writers of the Christian tradition have seen the force that motherhood has in symbolizing the redemptive task. I think that this is the truth behind the language of Jesus, of Anselm of Canterbury and of Julian of Norwich on the motherhood of Jesus, (although this also has special Eucharistic significance). This is the reason for texts such as that of Jeremiah 31, where the motherhood of Rachel (which failed), is contrasted with the motherhood of Jahweh which will succeed. Witness the triumphant line, 'Behold a woman shall encompass a man' (Jer 31,22b), which would seem to imply, in the Messianic times, that initiative shall be taken by a woman. It is significant that it is the failed motherhood of Rachel which is quoted by Matthew in the context of the Flight into Egypt. Through Rachel's child Israel comes to Egypt and is saved from famine, but eventually saved: for Mary's child Egypt is also a refuge, but Mary's child is the true liberator.

It is motherhood as symbolizing creativity, birthing energies, redeeming and saving, active nurturing, which we want to reclaim for humanity through Mary. Mary is the corrective we need in order not to see the redemptive/atonement action as over and finished with in the past with the cross of Jesus. She recalls us to the mutuality of redemption-to the need to be 'mutually messianic', redeemers of each other. I think that this is the truth hinted at by words like

'co-redemptrix', 'co-mediatrix'. And there are ecumenical implications in this: Catholicism has had authentic insight in seeing Mary so deeply involved with redemptive events: it is an unnecessary polarization to set Mary against her son, as versions of Protestantism did and some 'progressive' Catholic writers do, seeing the importance of one as detracting from the centrality of the other. The fact of Incarnation means that God stands in solidarity with the human race. We have seen how historically within Christian tradition, the divine Christ triumphed over the human Jesus. Even now, it is a struggle for us to see in Christ the potential of our humanity: yet Mary stands as proof of Christ's humanity, as corrective to a spiritualizing away of this. Nor should we see Christ and Mary in competition- where Mary seems central, as the argument goes, this represents a distortion of Jesus's role. No, redemption is relational in its nature-God is in relationship with humanity. The whole Christ event was and is relational. Hence Mary had family, friends: God worked and still works through the myriad interdependencies with which we are interlinked.

With this understanding, we can see why Mary has assumed such importance for liberation theology: it is indisputable that devotion to Mary flourishes among many poor people of both first and

third world cultures. For example, the devotion to our Lady of Guadeloupe originated in the apparitions of 1531, ten years after the Indian culture in Mexico was overrun by white Europeans. Our Lady of Guadeloupe represents an identity figure for the Mexican people alienated from its deepest roots. It is not just that Mary speaks for the little people, oppressed and marginalized by a dominant culture, but that through her 'Fiat', (that is, active cooperation), and her 'Magnificat', (that is, through protest and struggle against injustice), she calls to participation in the redemptive process. If her Son was Man of Sorrow, acquainted with grief, how much is this due to Mary, Mater Dolorosa, who lived out her life actively in the shadow of the cross? As the developmental psychologist Eric Erikson once said, 'Children can face life, if their parents can face death'. The challenge for feminist theology is, now that motherhood is freed from a purely biological interpretation, to discover how-within the context of the developmental framework, as this applies to women as well as men-the mother/son relationship contributed to the development of Jesus's Messianic consciousness. Furthermore, if we can see the redemptive process, not simply as Cross/Resurrection, but as Creation/Incarnation/ Redemption/New Jerusalem-all as unified process, then

we can see Mary both as symbolizing redeemed creation, and as summoning women to contribute both to our own and to the world's redemption.

We have seen how Goddess language, (the Isis traditions, for example), has been applied to Mary, and we have attempted to restore these female attributes to the Godhead. But the Goddess movement also has the function-and this is most significant-of recalling us to the immanent divine female. I do not believe that Mary should assume all the qualities of Isis, Astarte and Demeter, but I do believe she calls us to energize and bring to birth our powers; she calls us to rediscover our affinity and connectedness with nature and createdness as women. It is customary, within the Goddess movement, to refer to the three faces of the Goddesses maiden, mother and wise woman (crone). In a society which permits the abuse of young girls, the sufferings of mothers and the rejection of old women, Mary as symbol of the immanent divine female in us all is a summons to the redemptive path of self-affirmation which we must tread at every stage of the life-cycle. Finally, she calls us to incarnate for our own times, to give voice to the pain of those who cannot articulate, both the protest and the hope of her own Magnificat.

¹ The substance of this paper was first given at the AGM of the St Joan's Alliance, 6th February, 1988.

² Banks, Lynne Reid: *An end to running*, (London, 1962).

³ Boff, Leonardo: *The maternal face of God*, (Petropolis: Brazil, 1979).

⁴ Laurentin, Rene: *Court traite sur la Vierge Marie*, (Paris, 1968).

⁵ Semmelroth, Otto: *Mary, archetype of the Church*, (Dublin, 1964).

⁶ There are solid precedents for Boff's position, namely, certain theologians of the Russian Orthodox tradition-Boulgakov and Soloviev-and more recently, Cardinal Suenens. See 'The relation that exists between the Holy Spirit and Mary' in *Mary's place in Christian dialogue*, (St Paul Publications, 1982), ed Alberic Stacpoole OSB, pp 69-78.

⁷ Rich, Adrienne: *Of woman born: motherhood as experience and institution*, (London, 1976). See also the recent novel of Margaret Atwood, *The handmaid's tale*, (Picador, 1985).

⁸ Halkes, Catherine: *Maria beelden- Vrouw beelden*, in *Zoekend naar wat verloren ging*, (Baarn, 1985), pp 82-98.

⁹ Ruether, Rosemary Radford: *Sexism and God-Talk*, (London, 1983).

¹⁰ The only feminist writer who has developed Process Philosophy to any extent at the moment is Marjorie Suchocki. See *God, Christ and Church*, (New York, 1982).

¹¹ Heyward, Carter: *Our passion for Justice*, (New York, 1984), p 207.