

Mary in the Church

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I am deeply grateful for this opportunity to address you during a time of great suffering in our Church. When I accepted the invitation and chose a topic almost a year ago, I had no way of knowing what would burst upon the Catholic Church in America in the months to come. In that time, I have been drawn into a variety of conversations, both public and private, where concerned citizens seek to understand and to correct this situation of repeated abuse given protection by Church authority. In the course of that time, I have come to see Mary and Marian devotion as central to the healing for which we pray and for which we must work with all our energy. To set the stage for this idea that Mary is central to our healing as a Church, I want to paint a picture of her — a picture drawn from Sacred Scripture, from the liturgical and devotional life of the Church, and from the experience of the people of God. Given that picture, I want to explain the two principles that operate in our Church. One was very much in evidence at the last big Catholic meeting held in Texas: the bishops' meeting in Dallas. This principle is represented by Peter and by all those who, in continuity with him, exercise governmental authority in the Church. But there is another energy at work in the Church. It is represented by Mary and by all who work in continuity with her. To a great extent, the current crisis can be traced a systematic shutting out of those who represent Mary from knowledge and from decision making in the Church. To my mind, all who work to heal women and men of addictions are under the mantle of Mary in our Church.

Sacred Scripture

It is certainly true that the passages about Mary in the New Testament are few and — at first blush — contradictory. The Gospel of Mark gives us only the story of the mother who arrives with others at a place where the adult Jesus is teaching and requests that he come out to see them. He does not come out, but sends a message that seems to be a stunning rejection of the claims of blood ties. "Who is my mother? Who are my brothers? ... Here are my mother and my brothers. Whoever does the will of God is my brother, my sister, my mother." (Mark 3. 33-35) Mark also tells us that, on another occasion, his family tried to take Jesus away, for people were saying that he was out of his mind. (Mark 3.21)

It is unusual to hear this dimension of Jesus' life preached on. But it does tell us something very important about the mother's experience. Even if she does not yet understand what he is about, she has to learn that love for him will now mean love for all those whom he has gathered, all those who believe in him. This early account gives us a picture of the stretching of a mother's heart. The implicit challenge is that a familial relationship be transformed into a new community of faith.

Matthew, on the other hand, takes us back to the time before Jesus' birth and, in doing so, gives us an insight into the character of Mary. In the genealogy of Jesus — a genealogy replete with men — Matthew lists five women: Tamar, Rahab, Ruth, Bathsheba, and Mary. The presence of these five has generated great interest among those who study Scripture. We know that Mary's mysterious pregnancy has been traditionally interpreted as revealing a virginal conception for Jesus. But the stories of the four women who precede her in the genealogy provide an important key to the meaning of this virginal conception and to the theological reading that should be given it.

The four women are Tamar, Rahab, Ruth and Bathsheba. Tamar was cheated of a child by Judah and his family. So she disguised herself and seduced Judah, thereby accomplishing her goal of having a child of her dead husband's line. Rahab was a harlot who helped the scouts of Joshua when they were running from the enemy. She extracted from them the promise of protection and lived to bear a son and join the line of David. Ruth's husband died, leaving her a childless widow. In this beloved story, Ruth's fidelity to her mother-in-law brought her into the orbit of Boaz, a leader of the community. Under Naomi's tutelage, Ruth got Boaz to marry her and give her a son. Bathsheba, on the other hand, was wife to Uriah, one of David's generals. After David took Bathsheba and impregnated her, he had her husband killed so that he could marry her. In the wake of this terrible event, the child died. David, repentant, consoled her and Bathsheba conceived and bore another child, a son.

The final woman mentioned in the genealogy is Mary. Hers is the story of a woman whose betrothed suspects her of adultery. An angel comes to her betrothed in a dream and attests to Mary's innocence, so that her future husband — just man that he is — can, with good conscience, take her as his wife.

In the end, all the women who precede Mary in the genealogy found men to protect them and to give them a child. Their stories are full of the disasters of death, deceit, and irregular unions. The men in the stories are less than admirable. Judah and David have to be forced to take responsibility; Boaz has to be nudged by Ruth under Naomi's tutelage and at risk to her reputation; and Rahab has to extract from Joshua's scouts a promise for her safety.

The structure of Matthew's narrative puts Mary's experience in sharp contrast to what has gone before. Mary is not a childless wife or widow; she is betrothed. She has not been robbed of children by death or deceit; she is in the stage of anticipation. She does not have to force or beg Joseph to give her protection. God reveals to Joseph what he needs to know. Joseph is a just man; once he sees a way to give Mary protection without sinning against God, he takes her to himself.

What, then, is the significance of the Isaiah citation in Matthew's narrative? "Look, the virgin shall conceive and bear a son, and they shall name him Emmanuel." (Mt. 1.23) It means that Mary brings no history of failure, death, deceit, hurt, disappointment or any other negative to this situation. This pregnancy, like the others, is from God. But in Mary's case, there is no obstacle for God to overcome. The woman has conceived, as willed by God, and there is no stain upon it. This birth can indeed be considered a new creation, for it comes forth in direct response to God's intervention, God's messianic plan.

Luke gives us much more about Mary than the first two gospels do. His message about Mary's goodness is similar to Matthew's, though conveyed by a different set of images. Luke tells the story from Mary's point of view and sets up a contrast between her — who has never known man — and her cousin Elizabeth, who is barren. Now barrenness, in the language of Scripture, represents a great failure of nature. And it is a failure that prevents the woman so afflicted from fulfilling her God-given mission. In Elizabeth, God overcomes the failure of nature and gives her a child in her old age. In Mary, however, there is no failure to overcome. God invites and she responds with the timeless answer, "Behold the handmaid of the Lord; be it done to me according to your will."

It is no wonder that future ages of Christians came to be convinced of her sinlessness and to celebrate her immaculate conception. Both Matthew and Luke give us in symbol and story the picture of a woman untouched by historical or personal failing, a woman whose readiness to serve God is absolute, even when that service will put her at risk of being ostracized and branded a shameful woman.

We get another glimpse into her character in Luke's story of the Visitation. Here, she goes to her aged cousin, seeking to shelter and be sheltered in a strong relationship of trust. The poet Rainer Maria Rilke imagines the scene this way:

She had to lay her hand upon the other
woman's body, still more ripe than hers...
Each one, a sanctuary, sought refuge with her
closest woman kin.

(cited by Sally Cunneen, "In Search of Mary, The Woman and the Symbol" p. 52.)

And she proclaims in a song that has become part of the Church's prayer her understanding of what God had done in her. No one who knows the Magnificat can be surprised at the choices her Son made to take sides with the poor, the oppressed, the neglected, the cast out.

There is another story, recounted only by Luke, that shows the character of Mary's motherhood. We are told that when he was 12, Jesus broke away from his parents and was found three days later in the temple impressing the teachers of the law with his knowledge. His parents were understandably upset after such an absence, but he simply reminded them that he expected them to know he had to be about his Father's business. Despite this show of bravado, the story indicates that the parents took him back to Nazareth. He wasn't heard from again until he was a full grown man.

Most commentators see in this Lukan story a foreshadowing of the replacement of the earthly family with a family composed of disciples. In this, they are influenced by the passage from Mark I mentioned above. According to this way of reading the story of the child Jesus in the temple, Jesus is correcting his parents for

looking for him among relatives and friends when they should have known that he belonged to another Father and would be about the business of that Father's house. Read this way, Jesus is in the know and his parents in the dark; Jesus is right to have done what he did and his mother wrong to express her feelings. In other words, this reading makes Jesus the hero of the scene, a wonderchild teaching the doctors about the law and his parents about parenting. But I think this reading of the text is wrong, puts the emphasis on the wrong place, and misses something essential in the preparation of Jesus for his mission.

Think of it this way. Mary and Joseph, having searched desperately for their young Son, find him in the temple showing off for the doctors of the law. When the mother tells of the anxiety this has caused them, the Child expresses no sorrow over what they have been through, but corrects her in front of the doctors of the law with a cryptic saying about being in his Father's house.

The poet Alan Shapiro has a telling line in one of his poems: "A boy is nowhere else more boy-like than in the way he imagines being a man." What does Jesus' behavior say about the way he imagines being a man? No care for the feelings of others, even his parents: correcting them in front of others; acting on impulse regardless of the consequences to others or to himself (Remember, calling the temple "my Father's house" was considered blasphemy in an adult.) I think that Mary was aghast at what she saw and heard. But she does not give as good as she gets. We are told that the parents did not understand what Jesus said to them; not understanding, they did not speak.

But they did act. Whatever the act of remaining in the temple reveals about what Jesus wanted at that stage of his life, the text says that he went back down with them to Nazareth and was obedient to them. The phrases have great meaning in Luke: went back down to the low places where life is ordinary in contrast to the dramatic high place of the temple; to Nazareth, which might as well be Peoria, instead of to Jerusalem — a city comparable to both Rome and Washington.

In other words, Mary and Joseph said "No" to Jesus. No, you are not ready. No, you still have things to learn. No, that is not the way to serve God, not if it means that you have no feelings for others. It is up to us to imagine what transpired between this time and the public ministry. We must figure out what they taught Jesus that made of him the man who related to simple people, poor people, the sick, outcasts, sinners, women — oh, especially to women — in ways that manifested such exquisite delicacy and depth of understanding.

One thing we do know. When he began his public ministry for real, he did not go to Jerusalem to show off his learning in front of the doctors of the law. He went to the people to put his knowledge of the law at the service of their lives. It was this loving service that brought him into conflict with the authorities. And when he lays claim to his Father's house, it is in their defense, not in his own honor. I think his parents taught him to make such choices, against all the prevailing notions of what being a good Jew looked like. This story gives us some idea of the things that Mary pondered in her heart as she exercised her maternal authority over the developing child.

Luke's final picture of Mary shows her at the heart of the new community, constantly at prayer with those who gathered in the upper room and who, on Pentecost, were transformed into the missionary church of the first century.

With the Gospel according to John, we return to the relationship between Mary and the adult son. Where Luke shows her restraining the young child from manifesting his powers before he is mature enough to handle the results, John shows Mary being the catalyst for him to take responsibility.

My favorite translation of this famous story of the wedding feast of Cana actually comes from an elementary school child. The teacher, a religious sister, had the custom of reading the Bible story one day and inviting a child to tell it in her or his own words the next. The day after she had read the story of the wedding feast of Cana, a tough young guy from a very poor part of the town raised his hand and volunteered to tell the story. "Mary and Jesus and some friends went to this here party," he began. "Then Mary said to Jesus, 'They ain't got no wine.' And Jesus said, 'Well, hell — it ain't my party.'"

There is a world of meaning in this unpolished but accurate interpretation from the streets. I saw it once again when I was teaching at Notre Dame, a school at the opposite end of the social spectrum. I asked the class why Jesus had responded so harshly to his mother, when she told him that they had no wine. One young man said without hesitation, "Because she was facing him with his growing up time."

What a perfect meditation on Mary's role at Cana. She confronts Jesus with his growing up time, and does not let him shirk responsibility for the party. She creates the conditions for change by getting everyone ready and giving the admonition to "do whatever he tells you." She does not reprimand him in public nor contradict his

judgment. She just believes in him so completely that he is called beyond himself and into his role of Savior. It is true that the story has him saving a party and by saving the best till last. And it is also true that in the symbolism of the Bible, heaven will be a great party where all are welcome and the best food and drink will never run out.

In the Gospel according to John, Mary appears at the beginning of Jesus' public life and at the end of it. For it is John who gives us the poignant scene, where his mother stands near the cross — so near that her Son can speak to her and be heard despite the shouts and curses. And the words he speaks stretch her heart in a new way and renew the call she heard when he was conceived: Woman, behold your son; son, behold your mother. Her task of mothering will not be over, even when she has seen her Son executed as a public criminal. For with his last breath, he has asked her to mother the beloved disciple and with him the community that will come into existence. Thus does she become Mother of the Church, a mother “elected to taste every mother’s sorrow” (Scholem Asch, *Mary*, cited by Cunneen, p. 54)

Liturgy and Personal Devotion

On these stories and symbols from the New Testament treasury, the Christian community meditated and prayed. In time gaps were filled in and important questions answered. Stories were written about her life and the life of her parents. The community imagined her presence on Jesus' way to the cross and on the morning of resurrection. Unable to imagine her subject to death, the faithful soon began to celebrate a feast called the Dormition of Mary. This image of her falling asleep was accompanied by the belief that the risen Jesus came to take her to his side, so that she reigns with him in heaven forever.

The community came to proclaim Mary a virgin mother whose life and being were never touched by sin. At the same time, however, Christian believers understood that this mother’s heart embraces sinners; that she will use all the power at her disposal to fight on behalf of sinners against the powers that hold them in slavery. Let me recount just one of the legends and then tell you one real life story that illustrates my point. According to Sally Cunneen, by the time the Christian Church entered the Middle Ages the belief was widespread that “Mary’s power extended even to the depths of hell.” (146). One of the best known legends demonstrates this belief. It is the story of Theophilus, a deacon, who starts off so humble that he refuses the honor of being made bishop. But then the devil tempts him and he is seized with ambition. Theophilus therefore signs a contract with the devil He will give over his soul to the devil upon his death if the devil will allow him to achieve honor, power and glory .But then the good Theophilus begins to feel guilt. Becoming more and more desperate, he finally has recourse to Mary and prays before her statue until he falls asleep. In a dream, he sees Mary tear up the contract. When he awakes, he finds pieces of real parchment scattered all around him. He thanks Mary, confesses to the bishop, and dies in peace a short time later.

In the early part of the twentieth century, there was a famous French writer named Charles Peguy, who was passionate in his Catholicism and in his defense of his country. Once, however, his strong feelings got him into a conflict with a dear friend. In his judgment, the friend betrayed him in a serious and profound way. From that time on, Peguy could not recite the Our Father. He simply could not say, with integrity, “Forgive us our sins as we forgive those who trespass against us.” But he records that he continued to say the Hail Mary, for “there is not a single word of that prayer that a poor sinner like me cannot say.”

Peguy’s instincts were right in line with the whole Christian tradition regarding Mary. The earliest prayer we have to her comes from the second or third century and goes like this: “We fly to your patronage, O holy Mother of God; despise not our petitions in our necessities, but deliver us always from all dangers, O glorious and blessed Virgin.” In the Eastern Church to this day the people frequently say, “Most Holy Mother of God, save us.”

Over the centuries, the Christian imagination saw more and more the likeness between the Son and the mother. Feasts of the Church celebrated this likeness. Thus we have the Nativity of Mary and the Feast of Christmas or the Birth of Christ; the Immaculate Heart of Mary and the Sacred Heart of Jesus; the Ascension of Jesus and the Assumption of Mary; the Feast of Christ the King and the Feast of the Queenship of Mary. Nowhere is Mary more consistently identified with Christ than in his suffering. Early Christian art always placed a cross somewhere on Mary’s person. In time, the sharp angles of the cross were softened and made to look more like a flower or a star. Look at the icons of Mary and you will see them, usually in threes. In the Middle Ages, the devout firmly believed that the Feast of the Annunciation fell on the same day of Good Friday. Thus

they intuited a connection between Mary's passion and the passion of her Son. It is any wonder, then, that the Pieta — that representation of the broken body of the Son lying in the lap of the grieving mother — is most beloved throughout the Christian world.

At the same time, the most popular form of devotional prayer to Mary, the rosary, reminds us of the proper perspective on the Christian life: five for sorrow, ten for joy.

Mary's suffering, like that of her son, leads to life — eternal life for her and for all those who put themselves under her protection. And so another beloved image of Mary is the Mother of Mercy, who gathers all under her cloak. As Henry Adams said, "Her pity had no limit."

The Marian Principle

So now, what can we say to identify the wisdom and way of Mary? It is a way of operating that knows the other personally, that is willing to be with the other through stages of development and through stages of struggle. It is a wisdom born of allowing one's heart to be stretched until the dearest familial images of son or daughter can be applied to the stranger, even to the stranger who appears threatening to self or others. Mary's power is used on behalf of those who have fallen into traps. While the imagery is often of falling prey to the devil, we know that modern life affords many demons that are concrete and material.

Mary's tutelage leads one to side with the poor, the outcast, the downtrodden. She knows that the odds are never even and that those who are mighty often must be pulled down from their thrones in order for the lowly to have a chance. I think she understands the great need for community, since she herself became mother of the young Church.

The whole impulse to form therapeutic communities where wounded people can find a listening ear and a strengthening hand is Marian in its nature. This mother's heart embraces all who know the darkness of injustice, poverty, the various forms of abuse, addiction, illness, and despair. From the dawn of Christianity, her sons and daughters have believed in her power to set them free and have prayed for that miraculous liberation. "We fly to your patronage, O Holy Mother of God; despise not our petitions in our necessities, but deliver us always from all dangers, O Gracious and Blessed Virgin." These words, like the words of the Eastern prayer — "Most Holy Mother of God, save us" — could not be more appropriate in our day.

I think the time is ripe in Christianity to recover strands of our tradition that have been preserved in religious art and poetry and song; to bring to our thinking about Mary our real experience of being parents, teachers, mentors, rescuers of those gone astray. Nowhere is this more applicable than in the education of the men who will be our priests. For too long we have been willing to leave them in the temple, to leave their education to doctors of the law. The Roman Catholic world has paid a high price for this, I believe.

The July 12 National Catholic Reporter carried a marvelous account of a talk given by Bishop Gerald Robert Barnes of San Bernardino, California. In his talk, he recalled an incident when he was a seminarian, riding in the back of his parents' car through skid row in Los Angeles:

"The family was not unfamiliar with poverty: Barnes spent part of his childhood in the projects of East Los Angeles. After years of struggle, Barnes' father bought a mom-and-pop grocery store above which the family lived.

"As the car made its way through skid row, just before a traffic light, Barnes' father had to brake hard to avoid a man running across the road.

"I said, 'Look at that bum. What a waste.' My mother turned around and looked right at me in the back seat and said, 'He has a mother. He's someone's son,' [the bishop] told the audience in his keynote speech.

Barnes contrasted his own haughty attitude with his mother's grace: "I was a seminarian. I was studying Scripture. Attending daily Mass. I saw a nobody. She was living the Scriptures. She saw with her faith. I was the righteous, arrogant kid. She was compassionate. She saw kinship. A different view. I looked at him with disdain. She looked at him with acceptance. He was somebody." (NCR July 12, 1996, p. 4)

After his mother's death five years ago, he learned another lesson.

"During her wake, a street person walked into the church, went up to the coffin, knelt, made the sign of the cross with his hand on the coffin, got up and walked out." (Ibid.) Clearly what she said to him in the car, she had lived in her neighborhood.

One of the lessons we can learn from the present crisis in the Church is that those who represent Peter must allow themselves to be influenced by those who represent Mary. In the story above, the young seminarian

could be so deeply influenced because he was with his mother when the incident occurred. How different things might have been for the Catholic Church in the United States if, when the crisis first came to light, the bishops had called upon groups such as your own to enlighten them about the dynamics of abuse and the steps necessary to protect the innocent and to heal or at least help the abuser. Surely you could have warned them about the dangers of secrecy, denial, closed ranks, and deception in the name of saving face. Teachers and healers could have spoken for the young victims and prevented the stonewalling that led to the additional harm that came from being disbelieved or silenced by Church representatives.

Note, I am not saying that Mary is only represented by women. Mary is represented by all who operate in her way: person to person, often hidden and unsung, fearless in responding to God's call, even when it seems to go beyond currently accepted norms of behavior. The Mary we meet in the Annunciation is the same Mary whose intervention leads to the miracle at Cana — because she is confident that God's promise will be fulfilled.

The theme of your conference this year points directly to activities that are Christlike after the manner of Mary: "Go and do likewise." The Samaritan did not see the wounded man as one who belonged to a category and at the same time, he didn't see a "nobody." One might say that, like the bishop's mother, he saw someone's son, someone who, like him, had a mother.

And so this talk on Mary brings us to the One whom she conceived and bore and educated and lost and found and mourned and glorified. Honoring Mary will not take anything away from Christ nor will it take us away from following Christ. It will, if we are faithful, keep us from thinking that Peter or the bishops who continue in his footsteps are the only ones who represent the Church. Mary (and all those who operate like her in this life) shows forth another face of the Church. May we who are called to this exalted task grow in confidence and in courage to live under her protection and her patronage.

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