

MARY'S MOTHERHOOD MATTERS MOST

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THE YEAR OF FAITH which began on October 11th 2012, celebrates the fiftieth anniversary of the last Ecumenical Council and acknowledges its profound effects on the Church. Prior to the opening, Benedict XVI addressed participants gathered for the 23rd International Marian Congress in Rome:

As you know, on October 11, to remember that extraordinary event, we will solemnly begin the Year of Faith, that I wanted to orient with the *Motu Proprio 'Porta Fidei,'* which presents Mary as a model of faith, I invoke your special protection and advocacy on the path of the Church entrusted in her, blessed because she believed, this time of grace.¹

This date is of special significance for Blessed John XXIII wanted the Ecumenical Council to open precisely on October 11, on the same day on which the Council of Ephesus (A.D. 431) proclaimed Mary as '*Theotokos*' Mother of God. In placing the Year of Faith under the protection of Mary, the Pope exhorted those present to work towards a new theological understanding of what Mary means to the Church today.

A new theological insight suggests more than simply a progression of ideas. At particular times through the centuries different aspects of Mary's role in the history of salvation have come to the fore. Earliest scholarship, built on the Gospel stories, saw as its primary focus the recognition of Christ as the promised Messiah. Mary's role was interpreted and defined by those who sought to identify her within this Christological context. She is acknowledged as the human mother who gave Christ his Davidic and Messianic heritage.² Mary's rec-

ognition as *Theotokos* at the Council of Ephesus in 431 consolidates and ratifies this proposition. Her motherhood of the person Jesus takes in both his human and divine natures.

Benedict XVI, in his earlier role as Joseph Cardinal Ratzinger, expresses the complexity of this title and its formal progression to 'Mother of the Church', a title officially bestowed on Mary by Paul VI at the Second Vatican Council.³ Mary, says Ratzinger, represents creation called to respond to God and attain completion therein. 'Mary thus represents saved and liberated man, but she does so precisely as a woman...the 'biological' and the human are inseparable in the figure of Mary, just as are the 'human' and the theological'.⁴

Despite acknowledging Mary's biological necessity, the Church has concentrated on a theological understanding of her role as *Theotokos*, the Mother of God. She is further acknowledged as *Regina*, Queen of Heaven, as *Ecclesia* the personification of the Church and latterly, as a model for faithful discipleship.⁵ Essential as these understandings are, before Mary was any of these, she was a human mother.

It has been left largely to artists through the ages to make manifest the physical realities of Mary's pregnancy and Christ's birth. The mother suckling her baby, *Maria Lactans*, the essence of motherhood, was the earliest visualization of Mary. Two images, both painted in the catacombs towards the end of the second century⁶ show Mary as a contemporary mother feeding her baby - a motif, endlessly repeated throughout a history of art,

which was to reach its romantic high-point in the late Renaissance. The Counter Reformation brought with it new restrictions. Both Catholic and Reformed societies were becoming more insistent on bodily control and decorum in public places. Post-Tridentine Catholicism presented a more modest model for the faithful to imitate. Mary became silent, self-controlled, enclosed, obedient and demure.⁷ Since then Mary has become increasingly distanced from the maternal, her image beautified or glorified to suit the thinking of the times. With the social upheavals of the 70s and 80s the person of Mary as physical Mother has struggled for an identity.

When Marina Warner produced her ground-breaking study on the cult of the Virgin Mary—*Alone of All Her Sex*, written in the seventies but first published in Britain in 1985, she was writing from within the ambit of the sexual revolution and the rise of a populist movement which became identified as ‘women’s lib’.⁸ The title itself, taken from a work, *Paschalis Carminus*, by the fifth century Christian poet, Caelius Sedulius, encapsulates both the uniqueness and the enduring power of the Virgin Mary in Christian history. In one short phrase Mary is identified as a sexual being yet marked by her distance from it. The word ‘sex’ both recognises the difference between a man and a woman and names the act which brings them most intimately together. Mary is both a woman who shares something of what we understand today as womanhood but proposes also a model that we cannot hope to emulate. Such a model has ridden out the first wave of feminist condemnation and been buffeted by the shoals and eddies of feminist interpretation. Mary has been resuscitated and glorified by magisterial phraseology and dismissed in an age where virginity is at best misunderstood or thought simply irrelevant. Yet she remains defined arguably more often by her virginity than by her singular purpose—that of being the Mother of God. ‘The Virgin Mary’ is our most common identification both in saluta-



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tion and in prayer.

The insistence of the Church on the superior value of virginity has a long and battered history. It began with the first man and woman. Eve’s temptation of Adam, sinless and made in God’s image, moves within a biblical page, from the sin of disobedience to a recognition of sexual difference translated immutably and irrevocably by the early exegetes, into the ‘sin’ of sex. From the earliest writings of the Church Fathers, Mary’s virginal and immaculate motherhood stood in opposition to the destructive femininity of Eve.

The Eve-Mary parallel had its foundations in Paul’s recognition of Christ as the second Adam (Romans 5:12-21). As Christ was the new Adam so, logically, Mary became the second Eve. Beginning with Justin in the second century A.D. the redemption of Eve in Mary came to symbolize the salvation of the whole female sex.⁹ The mirroring of the Latin ‘Eva’ into the ‘Ave’ of the angel’s greeting became the *imprimatur* for a new understanding of Mary’s role in the history of salvation.¹⁰

Paul’s admonitions about the dangers of sex and the difficulties intrinsic in the married state set the tone for early Christian exegesis. He says: ‘There is something I want to add for the sake of the widows and those who are not married: it is a good thing for them to stay as they are like me but if they cannot control the sexual urges, they should get married since it is better to be married than to be tortured.’ (1Cor 7:8-9) The biblical scholar Raymond Brown, however, commenting on Matthew and Luke, points out that although ‘those evange-

lists might be considered unconsciously patriarchal...neither of them presents the conception of Jesus in the context of the superiority of celibacy or the impurity of women's sexuality...'11 It was left to Paul to make that connection.

Such ideas flourished within a historical and sociological background. Jewish laws concerning cleanliness and the 'impure' nature of blood and the debris of the womb (Leviticus 12-15) focussed on the unknown workings of the body and the perceived threats of both spiritual and physical contagion.¹² Origen's notions that conception and birth were a type of stain from which the body must inevitably be purified as it moved towards freedom, formed a thirsty seedbed for ideas of the anti-spiritual nature of the act of intercourse.¹³ Increasing interest in the functions of the body saw a pseudo-scientific line drawn between the sacred and profane, between virginity and moral integrity and the messy mixing and unstringing that physical union entailed, viewed as it was as a loss of control, a weakening of the human persona.¹⁴ A generation later, Augustine was to tie together the act of intercourse with the transmission of original sin introducing 'a powerful and toxic theme into medieval theology'.¹⁵

Virginity and celibacy seemed a propitious choice for the noble mind but, in societies with devastating mortality and high reproductive requirements, it was easier said than done. The begetting and rearing of legitimate children was a civic duty and the young were 'discretely mobilised' to that task simply for the population of the Roman Empire to remain static.¹⁶ Men were urged to marry. For women at least there was a history of consecrated virginity. The pagan world honoured such sacrifice. Civic virgins were recruited by the city and dedicated to the service of the gods. This was not always a life-time commitment; some were free to marry later in life.¹⁷ In the subsequent Christian world this history was captured for the Christian cause.

By the end of the second century women

had become identified with consecrated virginity.¹⁸ Biology of the time augmented that value, women were understood as failed men. Within the womb vital juices coagulated to a more intense degree in male foetuses making them strong and virile; left without such strength, women were soft and liquid, 'failed males'.¹⁹ All was not lost however. A woman could become 'male' by foregoing sex with all its disintegrating influences and give herself over to a consecrated virginity.²⁰ A preference for this vocation often had as much to do with a wish to escape marriage, the only other choice open to women, as it did to embracing such radical ideology. In a strange inversion of cause and effect Tertullian (c.160-225 AD) raised such vows to another plane. The consecrated woman became the Bride of Christ, the *sponsa christi*.²¹

According to Hilda Graef, the importance of virginity came to the fore only after Constantine legitimised the Christian religion (Milan 313) and martyrdom ceased to be one of the main elements of the Christian life. Ascetism, especially in the form of virginity, took its place. As a consecrated state with its own rules and customs Mary was the obvious exemplar. A Coptic document (325) announced the virginal attributes: 'Mary never saw the face of man, she never left her house, she ate only to sustain her body, she shut her eyes when she put on a garment...'. Mary was now portrayed not as she appears in scripture but as the ideal of a fourth-century consecrated virgin.²²

By the end of the fourth century Brown suggests, virginity formed the bench-mark for holiness. People held prominence in the Church according to whether or not, or even how much they had been contaminated by sex - virgins and celibates at the top; widows second and married people last...a marker, he says, between the pure and the less pure, a distinction in the hierarchy which pointed heavenwards.²³

Through centuries of theological debate Mary has attracted a carapace of doctrine

which has served to emphasize the difference between her humanity—that which links her to our human condition and her divine task of mothering the Son of God. It has edged her ever further from the human realities of motherhood and its intimacies and placed her safely within a space distanced from the human but with an affinity for it which both alienates yet attracts.

But the primacy of virginity belongs now to another time and another place. Where virginity had an understanding and a purpose in the ancient world which carried through to early Christianity, it no longer has the same call or meaning. It might have made sense to the early writers to see Christ as the human Son of God, impregnated in totality by the Spirit without any contributing genetic structure and simply ‘grown’ in his mother’s womb, but modern knowledge knows otherwise. Artists of the Middle Ages illustrated the extent of reproductive knowledge of the times. There are many examples of the Annunciation up to and beyond the sixteenth century, where the foetus is shown riding down the beams of light emanating from the Father, as a fully formed baby - at times already shouldering his cross.²⁴ An illumination from a Book of Hours, the Hours of Chevalier de Rohan, shows the Angel Gabriel kneeling before the Virgin as a baby descends down shafts of light. The Virgin holds a baker’s tray since she is the ‘oven in which the Bread of Life is to be baked.’²⁵

Such ideas now are quaint representations of a former age. Society has undergone radical change over the last fifty years. Science and sociology give a different perspective. Women question the validity of arguments which, from earliest Christian understanding, have relegated the single and most important God-given task of re-creation: that of conceiving, forming and nurturing other beings in the image and likeness of God, to at best a second rate duty for those who cannot resist the lures of the flesh, at worst—implied but not stated—to something lustful and uncon-

trolled.

An ignoring, rather than an ignorance of human biology has seen the emphasis of theological discourse fall undeservedly on the dangers inherent in relationships with the Eve/woman. An understanding of physiology undermines the idea of woman as seductress. It acknowledges what human observation has always known, that a woman can live her life begetting and raising children without a lustful thought or action. Man on the other hand must reach a measure of excitement for the act to take place.²⁶ An historic emphasis on ownership and a ‘woman’s duty’ gave men a sense of entitlement and with it a presumption of, or indifference to, any idea of mutual pleasure. Only in modern times have women had some measure of reproductive freedom. Such freedom has allowed them to make choices. Right or wrong, these choices now form part of the moral fabric of our society and must be taken into account. Marriage is no longer a societal necessity; virginity has become a considered choice.

Mary as virgin before, during and after the birth of her Son is an article of our faith. Mary’s virgin motherhood was commensurate with the divinity she bore. Her perpetual virginity, once a hotly contested theological point, now vested with the note of infallibility, is not so easy to assimilate. The sacrament of marriage has to negotiate that fraught hinge between the human and divine—between Mary as model wife and mother and the realities of human life. For those called to this vocation, the virginal model is to a great extent an anachronism. It is a model of a relationship which overrides and ignores the defining characteristic of marriage in both canon and common law. It provides a textbook case for an annulment in both.

There is ground to be gained by focussing not on the ‘superlative’ aspects of Mary’s life, those aspects which none can hope to emulate, but to focus on those that we can. The ‘maiden’ who answered the angel’s call, if we are to believe the only source for stories of

her early life, those found in the Early Christian Apocrypha, was groomed from birth for both virginity and a God-given task. Her response was not submissive or meek as we hear it so often described, but strong, courageous, resilient and questioning, her capitulation one of trust and renunciation. Mary's glory comes not from the virtue of virginity *per se* but from her courageous acceptance of the Lord's call. Her only call was to be a mother. Her child was not incarnated in some outer theological space separated from human reality by an obfuscating screen of mystery and doctrine, but deep inside the warm body of a woman. She contributed all that was human in her child, she gestated him and brought him to birth.

Mary's journey through motherhood was punctuated by familiar episodes of maternal distress. What mother does not recognise the anguish and the blame when the child she thought to be with others is lost for three days in the Temple? What mother faces without pain, the recognition that her son is on a different journey, that the power base has changed and it is no longer the mother guiding her son but the son separating from his mother? What mother does not recognise the intuitive response to an observed need 'They have no wine'? It makes no sense to a woman to white-wash the discomforts of pregnancy, to ignore the responsibilities, relentless concern and pain of growing another human being and to elevate simply the sufferings of a mother at the foot of the cross. Mary's pain began at the conception of her son.

An understanding of Mary as the Mother of God in the Church today needs a radical rethinking if she is to become again a model for our time. She has been theologised to the point that the laity have taken matters into their own hands, granting her a devotion which is often both unrealistic and cultish. Apparitions and titles which take no account of her motherhood appear to border on the model for which the early Reformers saved their particular invec-

tive, as did the Church itself- an adoration of the woman herself. A new understanding of Mary's place in the Church today invites a return to the beginning, a return to the scholarship of the early Church Fathers who first determined the importance and meaning of her presence within salvation history. Early beliefs need to be re-examined in the light of modern knowledge—the Gospels warn us against the dangers of putting new wine into old wine skins (Mark 2:22).

This is a year to get to grips with Mary's motherhood, to explore the full meaning of what it is to be a mother. Virginity and the celibate life are particular callings, they are not for all of us, nor as the Church has held them to be, are they greater than any of the vocations which humanity has found itself called to. Some values are over-arching. The virtues of continence and chastity apply equally to the married state. The primacy of priesthood will always remain with us as the physical and constant sign of God's promise and fulfilment. The necessity of celibacy for those called to this vocation remains a matter for debate.

Motherhood, however, is particular and universal; it transcends vocation, it is something we are all called to share for it demands what is particularly human, the need to bring to life and to love and to nurture those who come within our care, the need to love and allow ourselves to be loved. It is a way of engaging with life which recognises and takes on a responsibility not only for a personal family but also for the greater 'human family'. This is the human side of Mary, the Mary we can identify with and emulate. This is her gift to us. '*Theotokos*' is not just a doctrinal appellation for Mary but provides a real and meaningful way of living in the world today. 'The world of the New Testament is not our world, but the task of translating the challenge of Mary, woman and mother, which will speak to the women and men of our own times is an important one'.²⁷

NOTES

1 Excerpt from the Pope's address to the 23rd International Marian Congress, Rome, September 2012.

2 Ignatius of Antioch, *To the Smyrnaeans* 1, 1 in Luigi Gambero, *Mary and the Fathers of the Church* (San Francisco: Ignatius Press, 1999): 32

3 Mother of the Church was a title for Mary the Mother of God that was solemnly proclaimed by Pope Paul IV at the closing address of the third session of the Second Vatican Council on November 21, 1964

4 Cardinal Ratzinger in Hans Urs von Balthasar, Joseph Cardinal Ratzinger, *Mary: The Church at the Source* (San Francisco: Ignatius Press, 1997): 32

5 Patrick Bearsley's argument (1980) for a new paradigm within which Mary is seen as the 'Perfect Disciple' and a model for our age is of particular interest. Patrick Bearsley, 'Mary the Perfect Disciple: A Paradigm for Mariology' in *Theological Studies* 41 No.43 (September 1980)

6 See in particular *Maria Lactans* catacomb of St Priscilla Rome c.250

7 Donna Spivey Ellington, *From Sacred Body to Angelic Soul: Understanding Mary in Late Medieval and Early Modern Europe* (Washington: Catholic University Press, 2001): 148

8 Marina Warner, *Alone of All Her Sex* (London: Vintage, 1976).

9 Tina Beattie, 'Mary in Patristic Theology' in Sarah Jane Boss ed. *Mary, The Complete Resource* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2007): 90

10 The 'Ave' of the angels greeting cleverly reversed the name of Eve (Eva in Latin). An antiphon composed in the seventh or eighth century for the feast of the Annunciation reads:

Sumens illud Ave,
Gabrielis ore,
Fundat nos in Pace

Mutans nomen Evae

(Receiving the Ave from the lips of Gabriel, establishes us in peace, changing Evas's name) quoted in Warner: 60

11 Raymond Brown, *The Birth of the Messiah* (New York: Yale University Press, 1993): 703

12 Peter Brown, *The Body and Society: Men, Women and Sexual Renunciation in Early Christianity*. Twentieth Anniversary Edition (New York: Columbia University Press, 2008): 352

13 Brown, 352

14 Brown: 353

15 Brown, 353

16 Brown, 6

17 Brown, 8

18 Dyan Elliott 'Tertullian, the Angelic Life and the Bride of Christ' in Lisa M. Bitel and Felice Lifschitz, *Gender and Christianity in Medieval Europe: New Perspectives* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2008):16

19 Brown,10

20 Brown, 16

21 Elliott, 29

22 Hilda Graef, *Mary, A History of Doctrine and Devotion* (London: Sheed and Ward, 1963): 50

23 Brown, xvi-xvii

24 See for example a 14th century panel from the Grabow Altarpiece, *The Annunciation*, Meister Bertram of Minden, now held at the Kunsthalle, Hamburg, Germany.

25 Warner, 40. The Rohan Master, *A Book of Hours* 1430-45. *Annunciation*, fol. 212, pl. 83. Bibliothèque Nationale, Paris.

26 This is of course without medical intervention which appears now to be an increasing factor in conception.

27 Francis J. Moloney, *Mary: Woman and Mother* (Eugene, Oregon: Wipf and Stock, 1988): 53

The Mother of the Redeemer has a precise place in the plan of salvation, for 'when the time had fully come, God sent forth his Son, born of a woman, born under the law, to redeem those who were under the law, so that we might receive adoption as sons. And because you are sons, God has sent the Spirit of his Son into our hearts, crying, 'Abba! Father!'' (Gal. 4.4-6)

—John Paul II, *Mother of the Redeemer*, 1987, par.1.