

MARY, OUR MENTOR IN PRAYER

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MARY OF NAZARETH was among the ‘little poor ones’ known as God’s *anawim*. Fully graced from the first moment of her existence by the most Holy Trinity, and Mother-Disciple of Jesus Christ the Lord, she was in her earthly life, and now from among the communion of saints in glory, pre-eminently the Woman of Faith. There is a mysterious dynamic at work whereby past memory of Mary enables her loving presence to be experienced in the Church today offering an enduring hope for its role in extending the Reign of God.

Salvation history is marked throughout by decisive moments calling for free human decision to be made in faith. We might think immediately of Abraham’s decision to obey the Word of God commanding him to take his son Isaac to Mount Moriah for sacrifice (Gen 22: 1-14), or recall Moses’ absolute trepidation when faced with his ‘Burning Bush’ experience (Ex 3: 1-12). We might recall other numinous experiences of divine encounter—of Isaiah’s temple vision of the Lord of Hosts and the cleansing of his lips with a live coal (Is 6: 1-13), of Ezechiel’s vision of a raging storm flashing apocalyptic creatures (Ez 1), or of Paul’s blinding ‘Damascus’ experience (Acts 9:1-9). In this reflection we will think especially of the Word of God being revealed in Gabriel’s annunciation to Mary of Nazareth (Lk 1: 26-38). In empathy with her, we enter into the mystery of the Incarnation; we are fraught with her as she is confronted with the implications of being asked to give flesh to the Son of God; we are astounded at her forthright courage in questioning a divine plan that would cut across all her normal reference points; we rejoice in the far-reaching conse-

quences of her heart’s decision: ‘Be it done to me according to your word . . .’

Every revelatory God-moment is simultaneously a human moment of what is known as *mysterium fascinans et tremendum*¹. Such moments of insight allure while filling us with holy fear; God invites but never coerces us, to surrender to the Word of the living God. Poet T.S. Eliot captures something of this mysterious experience in his metaphor of ‘the still point in the turning world’.²

At the still point of the turning world.
Neither flesh nor fleshless;
Neither from nor towards; at the still point,
there the dance is,
But neither arrest nor movement. And do not
call it fixity,
Where past and future are gathered. Neither
movement from nor towards,
Neither ascent nor decline. Except for the
point, the still point,
There would be no dance...
Without elimination, both a new world
And the old made explicit, understood
In the completion of its partial ecstasy...

I am using this metaphor in reference to the Blessed Virgin Mary. ‘The still point in the turning world’ of permeable time—Mary’s time, the Church’s time, our time—suggests a delicate balance between what may be described as contemplation in the field of eternity, and as action in the field of time.³ Thus, Eliot’s ‘dance’ of salvation involves ecstasy and agony as well as daily humdrum ordinariness. However turbulent one’s ‘turning world’ may be, there remains faith’s ‘still point’ to be discovered in contemplative prayer, through treasuring the Word and pondering it in the heart as Mary did (Lk 2:19, 51).

Mary's Prayer

Mary of Nazareth was nurtured in the covenant faith of her People. The psalms of David were a source for her prayer. Before and after her marriage to Joseph, Jewish family, social, scriptural, ritual and liturgical traditions formed the pattern of her life of prayer. Placed on the lips of a young woman newly pregnant with the long-awaited Messiah, how magnificently does Luke's *Canticle of Mary* (Lk 1:46-55), capture the history of her people and echo Israel's ancient 'cry of the poor' seeking liberation from bondage and injustice. How well it captures too the early Church's sense of Mary's prophetic witness to the great deeds of God's redemptive action yet to be accomplished in Christ.

I acclaim the greatness of the Lord,
I delight in God my Saviour;
who regarded my humble state.
Truly from this day on
all ages will call me blessed.
For God, wonderful in power
has used that strength for me.
Holy the name of the Lord!
whose mercy embraces the faithful,
one generation to the next.
The mighty arm of God
scatters the proud in their conceit,
pulls tyrants from their thrones and raises up
the humble.
The Lord fills the starving
and lets the rich go hungry.
God rescues lowly Israel,
recalling the promise of mercy
the promise made to our ancestors,
to Abraham's heirs forever.⁴

We have intimations only of how Mary's mature prayer life developed during and after the public ministry of Jesus until the time of her own death. The synoptic Gospel tradition includes Mary among the 'true kindred' of Jesus, namely all those who hear the word of God and do it (Mk 3:31-35; Mt 12:46-50; Lk 8:19-21), a reality reaffirmed when an anonymous woman raised her voice in praise of Mary: 'Blessed is the womb that bore you and



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the breasts that nursed you!' To which Jesus responded: 'Blessed *rather*⁵ are those who hear the word of God and obey it!' (Lk 11:27-28). The stress on 'rather' or 'in fact' is revealing in the light of Luke's parable of the seed falling upon good soil (Lk 8:15): '...as for [the seed] in good soil, they are those who hearing the word, hold it fast in an honest and good heart, and bring forth fruit in patience'. Thanks to Mary's 'holding fast' to God's word in faith and action, 'the blessed fruit of her womb' is Jesus.

Two powerful prayer moments—'They have no wine', uttered at the wedding in Cana (Jn. 2:1-12), and Mary's silent prayer of agony as she stood by the Cross of Jesus—are handed down to us in the highly symbolic presentation of the Mother of Jesus in the Gospel of John (Jn 19:25-27).

The last explicit mention of Mary at prayer in the New Testament speaks of her presence among the group of Jesus' disciples at the Church's Pentecost awakening: '...All these were constantly devoting themselves to prayer, together with certain women, including Mary the mother of Jesus, as well as his brothers [and sisters]' (Acts 1:14).

Mary as Mentor

In naming her as 'our Mentor in prayer', we imply that Mary, Woman of Faith, guides us in specifically *Christian* prayer (Mt 6; Lk 11:1-13; Jn 17:1-25). It is important to remember how Jesus' teaching on prayer as recorded in Luke's gospel, gives particular emphasis to the

fact that the greatest gift of God in answer to all needs addressed to the Father in our daily ‘asking and seeking and knocking’, is the gift of the Holy Spirit (Lk 11:13). It is St Paul who would have us know well that,

... it is the very Spirit bearing witness with our spirit that we are children of God, and if children, then heirs of God and joint heirs with Christ... [and have us know also, that when we pray] that very Spirit intercedes with sighs too deep for words. And God, who searches the heart, knows what is the mind of the Spirit, because the Spirit intercedes for the saints according to the will of God. (Rom 8:16-17; 26-27).

Gabriel’s promise that: ‘The Holy Spirit will come upon you and the power of the Most High will overshadow you...’ (Lk 1:35), has been fulfilled in Mary. With her faith re-confirmed at Pentecost, Mary can, and does, lead believers into the ways of the Spirit for ‘building up the Body of Christ, until all of us come to the unity of the faith and of knowledge of the Son of God, to maturity, to the measure of the full stature of Christ’ (Eph 4:13).

If we identify Mary as our Mentor in prayer, then it is presupposed that we have already begun to ‘live Christ’ in ways that are open to the whisperings of the Spirit. We can all, men and women alike, claim Mary, the faithful disciple, as an intimate, pilgrim-companion—*compañera* as Latin American women like to call her—on our journey of faith. As a mentor, Mary can be claimed as someone who wisely and lovingly encourages, challenges and supports us in discerning pathways to be followed at critical turning points in life, who respects our common humanity and freedom, who befriends us in joy, in oppression (and depression) and in hope; she is ‘truly our sister’⁶ and soul-friend (*anam cara*) as the Irish like to call her. Christian memories of Mary’s family life in Galilee during the time of Herod the Great, of her being a victim of culture and circumstance in a society dominated by Roman occupation, bring today’s victims courage from remembering her single-mindedness and extraordinary confidence in

divine power to reverse the dehumanizing powers of evil. Memory of her active co-operation in the mission of Jesus, and in the first apostolic community qualifies her as our Mentor *par excellence*.

Mary within the Church

When Vatican Council II included its teaching on ‘The Blessed Virgin Mary, Mother of God, in the Mystery of Christ and the Church’ as Chapter 8 *within* the document *Lumen Gentium*, a momentous decision was taken. From the late Middle Ages devotion to Mary in the Church of the West, had steadily developed into a ‘mariology of privileges’ that eclipsed the humble Mary of Nazareth. An exaggerated ‘pious enthusiasm’ for Mary as arch-intercessor on behalf of all those ‘mourning and weeping in a valley of tears’, in effect, displaced Christ as ‘one and only Mediator’ with the Father (Heb 8:6; 12:24). Popular perception of Christ as an angry and vengeful Judge, frequently afforded the person of Mary pseudo-goddess, Magna-Mater status. Art work in the mediaeval West represented her as the high Queen of Heaven, magnificently arrayed and splendidly crowned. Thanks to Vatican II, the place of Mary within—*vs* being ‘above’ or ‘higher’ than—the Church has been reclaimed in a number of ways, for example:⁷

- Contemporary theology of the Holy Spirit has recovered awareness of the Spirit’s role in the Old Testament, in the mission of Jesus, in the life of Mary and the Church. Honorific titles attributed to Mary as Advocate, Helper, Mediatrix and Mother of the Church, have been reclaimed for the Spirit, the original ‘mother of all believers’.⁸
- Marian dogmas and doctrines (*e.g.* Immaculate Conception, virginal maternity and Assumption), all of which are primarily about Christ and not about Mary-in-herself, have been developed theologically so as to clarify their relevance to the Church.

- Mary's role in the history of salvation and evangelization, and in the focus given to her in liberation and feminist theologies have been studied closely.
- Appreciation of the place of marian piety with respect to the Church's liturgical worship has been restored.
- The relevance of Mary's discipleship has become critical in contributing to the Church's self-understanding today.
- Well developed ecumenical dialogue has already 'removed' Mary from being a major source of contention for many Protestant Christians.⁹ Interfaith Islamic-Catholic dialogue has enabled Catholics to discover the importance of Jesus and Mary in the *Qur'an*.

These factors combine to enrich the context for naming Mary as our Mentor in Christian life and prayer.

Mary at Prayer within the Church at Prayer

The significance of Vatican II's consideration of Mary's place in the Church becomes more apparent when we consider the connection of *Lumen Gentium*: 8 with Chapter 5, 'The Call of the Universal Church to Holiness'. There is no hierarchy of privilege for being graced in the Spirit. There is one baptismal calling whereby, 'all Christians in whatever state or walk in life are called to the fullness of Christian life'.¹⁰ Among the 'cloud of witnesses' on earth and in glory, Mary joins many other mentors who encourage us, who are still 'running the race' while looking to Jesus, the pioneer and perfecter of our faith... (Heb. 12:1-2)

The Church's liturgical prayer is ever mindful of the uniqueness of Mary's divine motherhood as we celebrate her calling. We honour her as 'the ever virgin mother of Jesus Christ our Lord and God'¹¹ in the Eucharistic prayers. We remember Mary in major feast-days throughout the year, beginning with the feast of her Divine Motherhood on January 1st

that carries forward into major celebrations of the Annunciation, the Assumption and the Immaculate Conception. During Advent each year we enter deeply into the mystery of Mary's waiting upon the Word praying that Christ will be re-born in the hearts of the faithful at Christmas time. We call upon 'Holy Mary, Mother of God' immediately after Christ when calling upon all the saints in the liturgy of baptism. Naming invokes presence. The Latin American Church has a cherished sense of this when, in including the names of their own martyrs in the litany of the saints, the people respond, *Presente!* instead of *Pray for us*. *Presente* invites Mary's presence and expresses a palpable trust that she is among the community. The *Magnificat* (Mary's 'toast to God'¹²) is prayed as the Church's prayer throughout the world continuously across all time zones in the Evening Office of religious communities. In private prayer such as the Rosary and the Angelus we also, with Mary, give thanks for her role in salvation history.

Mary, First Disciple

Since Vatican II, the Catholic community has experienced the results of a shift away from 'theoretical' concentration on Mary's divine motherhood as a fundamental theological principle for representing her as an archetypal model of the Church. Under the influence of modern biblical scholarship, a paradigm of 'discipleship' has enabled a renewed way of 'seeing' Mary as involved, like ourselves, in the obscurity of faith's pilgrimage in history; it has allowed for an understanding of Mary in terms of her commitment to Jesus in a 'hospitality of faith more than in the hospitality of her body which welcomed his coming to his people'.¹³ A paradigm of discipleship provides a contemporary perspective for enhancing appreciation of the divine privileges associated with Mary's motherhood of Christ.¹⁴

A 'discipleship' paradigm allows the Church to relate to the accompanying presence of Mary as our Mentor in an intimately

symbolic way not readily possible when she is represented as a theoretical ‘sign’, or an idealised ‘exemplar’ whom we strive to imitate. We are deeply aware at present of the paradox expressed in *Lumen Gentium*: 1, §8 that the Church is both holy in her essence but sinful in her members, that while being truly the sacrament of the Risen Christ, she is always in need of purification through penance and renewal in order to reveal God’s Word in history. At the very heart of her reality, the Church is called to servant-discipleship, to be totally and unconditionally, which is to say ‘virginally’, open to the love of God in Christ and through the Holy Spirit as Mary was and is.

In keeping with the intention of *Lumen Gentium*: 8, the exhortation, *Marialis Cultis* (1974) by P. Paul VI gave a timely reminder to the faithful, of the importance of situating true devotion to Mary within the framework of biblical, liturgical, ecumenical and anthropological criteria.¹⁵ Mary was proposed by the Pope as a ‘shining example’, as a ‘mirror’ reflecting the expectations of contemporary women and men. She was therefore deemed worthy of our imitation because of her hearing and doing the Word of God and because charity and a spirit of service were the driving force of her actions. I would like to suggest that while P. Paul VI made use of vocabulary associated with an understanding of Mary as an ‘exemplary model’¹⁶ in describing her, the thoughts expressed may be re-read now through a ‘discipleship’ lens that accords perfectly well with the understanding of Mary as Mentor that we have been considering.

Marialis Cultis emphasized the importance of the ecclesial nature of our devotion to Mary. Overshadowed by the Spirit and blessed with Mary’s prayer and presence, the Church of history is in the act of becoming an ‘attentive virgin’ accepting, proclaiming and venerating the Word of God in faith and in her mission of responding to the signs of our times. The Church, is called now to be with Mary a ‘virgin at prayer’ praising God unceasingly and

interceding for the needs of the world; to be a fruitful ‘virgin mother’ in giving birth to new children through the sacrament of baptism, and to be a ‘virgin presenting offerings’ in every Eucharistic celebration of the Lord’s Passover until he comes again. With Mary, may we as the Church now, strive to be a new *anawim*, struggling in the midst of action on behalf of the Reign of God, to create a quality of contemplative heart-space for the Spirit to renew the face of the earth. With Mary, may the Church’s presence in the world come to realize Isaiah’s portrayal of the servant-disciple who awakens, morning by morning, to God’s gift of a ‘disciple’s ear’ that listens deeply to God’s word so as to teach it with a ‘disciple’s tongue’ (Isaiah 50:1-5).

When the Church remembers Mary as Disciple, we are alerted to an ‘edge of danger’ that prevents an easy accommodation to or settling down into an unjust *status quo*.¹⁷ Our service of discipleship towards others, especially those suffering from the myriad forms of injustice, can quicken hope. Modern litanies support a consciousness of the presence of Mary among us, as illustrated, for example by some selections from the litany of Mary of Nazareth, promoted by *Pax Christi*:

Mary, wellspring of peace, be our guide
 Model of courage ...
 Model of risk ...
 Model of openness ...
 Model of perseverance ...
 Mother of the Liberator, pray for us
 Mother of the homeless ...
 Mother of the non-violent ...
 Mother of a political prisoner ...
 Oppressed woman, lead us to life
 Marginalised woman ...
 Sign of contradiction ...
 Seeker of sanctuary ...
 First disciple, empower us
 Woman of mercy ...
 Woman of faith ...
 Woman of vision ...
 Woman pregnant with hope ...
 Woman centred in God ...¹⁸

Conclusion

Finally, let me return to the poet's metaphor of 'stillness'; it echoes, I believe, much of contemporary experiences of turbulence:

The endless cycle of idea and action
Endless intervention, endless experiment,
Brings knowledge of motion, but not of

stillness;
Knowledge of speech, but not of silence;
Knowledge of words, and ignorance of the
Word.¹⁹

Mary, Woman of Faith, our Mentor in prayer,
Presente!

NOTES

1 The numinous concept of the Other before which humanity both trembles and is fascinated. See Rudolph Otto, *The Idea of the Holy* (London: OUP, 1958).

2 T.S. Eliot, 'Burnt Norton' in *Collected Poems, 1909-1962* (London: Faber & Faber, 1963), 191-192.

3 See 'The Still Point in the Turning World', Bishop Bennett D. D. Burke, www.global.org/Pub/Burke_The_Still_Point.asp (Accessed 12/03/2010)

4 ICEL translation.

5 Emphases throughout are mine.

6 See P. Paul VI, *Marialis Cultis* (1974), §56.

7 See Thomas A. Thompson SM trans., *The Mother of the Lord: Memory, Presence, Hope: Pontifical International Marian Academy* (New York: St Pauls, 2007) for concise review of questions facing marian theology and devotion today.

8 See Edward Schillebeeckx & Catharina Halkes, *Mary: Yesterday, Today, Tomorrow* (New York: Crossroad, 1993), 26-29. To note: the historical transference of titles from The Holy Spirit as 'Mother of the Church', to the Church as 'Mother' to Mary as 'Mother of the Church' (ca C11). See also George H. Tavard, *The Thousand Faces of the*

Virgin Mary (Collegeville: Liturgical Press, 1996), 204-207.

9 See *Mary, Grace and Hope in Christ: The Seattle Statement of the Anglican-Roman Catholic International Commission*, Eds Donald Bolen & Gregory Cameron (London: Continuum, 2006).

10 *Lumen Gentium*: 5, nn. 39; 41.

11 *E.g.* Eucharistic Prayer 1

12 Edward Schillebeeckx, *God Among us: The Gospel Proclaimed* (New York: Crossroad, 1983), Ch. 4. 20-26.

13 See John Thornhill SM, *Sign and Promise* (Australia: Collins) 1988, 229-234.

14 See Patrick J. Bearsley SM, "Mary the Perfect Disciple: A Paradigm for Mariology", *Theological Studies*: 41, 3, 1980.

15 P. Paul VI, *Marialis Cultis* (Sydney: St Pauls Publications, 1974) §§ 24-39.

16 *Marialis Cultis* §§17, 18, 19, 20.

17 Elizabeth A. Johnson, *Truly Our Sister*, 319, citing J.B. Metz, *Faith in History and Society*, trans David Smith (New York: Seabury, 1960), 88-89.

18 <http://campos.udayton.edu/mary/prayers/litpray02.html> (accessed 2/03/2010)

19 T.S.Eliot, 'The Rock 1', *Collected Poems*, 16

Mary is also the Virgin in prayer. She appears as such in the visit to the Mother of the Precursor, when she pours out her soul in expressions glorifying God, and expressions of humility, faith and hope. This prayer is the Magnificat, Mary's prayer par excellence, the song of the messianic times in which there mingles the joy of the ancient and the new Israel.

—Pope Paul VI, *Marialis Cultus*, 1974, par. 18.