

Rediscovering Mary

INTRODUCTION

I was born and raised in St Alphonsus parish in Edmonton, Alberta, Canada. Since it was a Redemptorist parish, there were devotions to Our Mother of Perpetual Help every Wednesday. This was during the 1950s, so mass was not associated with the evening devotions; I often attended the 5:30 pm devotions with my father. People came from all over the city, and the church was full.

In 1960, at the age of thirteen, I began my Redemptorist formation at the minor seminary and was away for twelve years (except for summers 1961-64). In 1972 I returned home to be ordained priest at St Alphonsus Church. My ordination was on a Tuesday evening, and the next day I was assigned to preside at the 5:30 pm mass with Perpetual Help devotions. It was a wonderful way to begin my priestly ministry; however, there was a certain sadness about it too – there were only eleven people there to honour Mary.

That raised many questions for me. What had happened? What had changed? What is Mary's place in the church and in our Christian life and spirituality? When I was growing up, I heard priests say, "We can never say enough about Mary." That no longer seems to be the case! At least in North America, Marian devotion is not what it was in the 1950s.

Many factors have contributed to the decline in devotion to Mary in my part of the world. While I do not want to go into detail here, I think Jean-Pierre Prévost's assessment of the situation in 1988 is still valid:

With all due respect to groups and individuals who continue zealously to promote devotion to Mary, we must admit that...Mariology and devotion to Mary have changed radically. From a Mariology that flourished

everywhere, there is now one that is isolated, even marginalized, and not clearly defined.¹

It seems to me that any revival or renewal of devotion to Mary needs to be rooted in and based on a solid theology of Mary. That is where I begin here, taking to heart the words of Pope Paul VI:

Thus our own time, faithfully attentive to tradition and to the progress of theology and the sciences, will make its contribution of praise to her whom, according to her own prophetic words, all generations will call blessed (cf Lk 1:48).²

I. DOCTRINE

I first look at doctrine, rather than Scripture, because there is a widespread misconception that the content of Catholic teaching about Mary is vast. Despite the great volume of Catholic writing about the Blessed Virgin Mary through the centuries, there are only four dogmas³ concerning Mary.

In his Apostolic Exhortation on devotion to the Blessed Virgin Mary, Pope Paul VI reflected briefly on each of the four Marian solemnities in the Catholic liturgical calendar: Immaculate Conception (December 8), Mary Mother of God (January 1), Annunciation (March 25), and Assumption into Heaven (August 15). He concludes:

These four solemnities, therefore, mark with the highest liturgical rank the main dogmatic truths concerning the handmaid of the Lord.⁴

And those “dogmatic truths” are also four-fold: the church solemnly teaches that Mary is the Mother of God, that she is a virgin, that she was conceived

¹Prévost, Jean-Pierre, *Mother of Jesus*. Ottawa: Novalis, 1988, p 3

²Paul VI, *Marialis Cultus*, 1974, “Introduction”

³A dogma is a statement of faith that belongs definitely and unquestionably to the body of Catholic teaching. Dogmas are doctrines promulgated with the highest solemnity and the greatest authority as ‘definitive rules of faith.’

⁴*Marialis Cultus*, No. 6

without sin and that at the end of her earthly life she was taken body and soul into heaven.

The first two dogmas – Mary’s divine maternity and her virginity – through Mary tell us something about her son Jesus Christ. The other two – Mary’s immaculate conception and her assumption – through Mary tell us something about salvation in Jesus Christ and therefore about ourselves, who are the church.

Even to mention the distinction in marian dogmas between those that tell us something about Jesus and those that tell us something about redemption is already important,⁵ because it reminds us that we do not honour Mary simply for her own sake, or in a vacuum. Devotion to Mary should always lead us to a deeper love for her Son Jesus Christ and to a deeper appreciation for the gift of redemption that is ours in Jesus. Anything that we honour in Mary is the gift of God’s grace in her and reminds us that God will also lead us to holiness. Our devotion to Mary should direct our attention to Jesus Christ and to God’s promise of salvation held out to all of us.

Let me say a word about each of the marian dogmas.

1. Mary is the Mother of God.

This is the most ancient teaching about Our Lady, and it is the foundation of all her other privileges and of all that the church teaches concerning Mary. This dogma speaks of Mary’s place in God’s plan to save the human race by the Incarnation of the Second Person of the Trinity.

To profess that Mary is the Mother of God is to say that the one who is her son is also God. That is exactly what the Council of Ephesus in the year 431 solemnly decreed: “If anyone does not confess that Emmanuel [Jesus] is

⁵Pope Paul VI honours this distinction when in *Marialis Cultus* he frequently refers to Mary as “the holy Mother of God [first 2 dogmas] and the worthy Associate of the Redeemer [second 2 dogmas].” One place is in No.15.

truly God and the Blessed Virgin therefore the Mother of God because she bore according to the flesh the incarnate Word of God – let them be anathema.”⁶

The divine maternity of Mary was defined not so much to honour Mary as to state the truth about her son Jesus Christ, to proclaim the mystery of the Incarnation. Jesus is truly God, and because born of woman, he is truly human. The reason for Mary’s importance and the veneration we owe her is her son Jesus. The very centre and focus of her life is Jesus Christ. Through Mary we can come to her son. And so, from the earliest times, Mary has been honoured in the church and in the liturgy as the Mother of God.

2. Mary is a Virgin.

The second marian dogma – her virginity – also emphasizes that her son Jesus comes from God. In Jesus Christ something new begins for the human race; and it is **God** who makes the new beginning. God saves the world. The virginity of Mary is not simply a biological fact; it is a **theological** fact as well, a significant truth of faith. Mary is a virgin: she received and carried within her what is given and supported by God, Jesus Christ who is Lord and Redeemer.

God makes the new beginning for his people. That is why the man (the male) – symbol of activity, of making history – is not involved. Rather it is a virgin – symbol of waiting and openness – who receives the initiative of God’s grace. Jesus Christ, our Redeemer, is from God; so we rejoice in the virginity of Mary.

The first two marian dogmas lead us to reflect on the mystery of the Incarnation. The second person of the Trinity became human in Jesus; Jesus is both human and divine. The other two marian dogmas lead us to reflect on the mysteries of Redemption. The reason God became human in Jesus was

⁶Neuner & Roos, (ed: K. Rahner), *The Teaching of the Catholic Church*. Staten Island NY: Alba House, 1967, No. 234, p 148.

out of love – for the salvation of the world. The other two dogmas regarding Mary show us the immensity and power of that salvation won for us in Jesus.

3. The Immaculate Conception.

The Immaculate Conception of Mary expresses the **totality** of the grace of Christ. The Immaculate Conception means that from the first moment of her conception in the womb of her mother (Anne), Mary was free from original sin, because of the merits of her son Jesus Christ. This was a unique privilege granted to Mary because of her role in the plan of God to redeem the human race.

Mary's immaculate conception proclaims that the grace of God in Jesus Christ is not limited to our feeble notions of time and space, and yet it embraces individual persons. Even before Jesus took flesh, before the historical mission of Jesus Christ, Mary already enjoyed the results of that mission. By God's grace human persons can escape the power of evil. We share in that victory through Baptism; Mary shares in it from the first moment of her conception.

4. The Assumption.

And the last of the four marian dogmas expresses the **final victory** of the grace of Christ. At the end of her life on earth, Mary was taken body and soul into heaven. The promise of the resurrection, held out to all of us in Jesus, is fulfilled in his Mother Mary. As she was perfectly united to her son during her life on earth, so does she remain perfectly united to him in heaven. She already enjoys the fullness of resurrected life.

“Christ has risen from the dead; we need no further assurance of our faith. ‘Mary assumed into heaven’ serves rather as a gracious reminder to the

church that our Lord wishes all whom the Father has given him to be raised with him.”⁷

Mary belongs to us – the People of God, the church – and in her we see fulfilled what awaits all of us.

II. SCRIPTURE

New Testament evidence in support of the first two marian dogmas is quite clear – especially in the Infancy Narratives of Matthew and Luke and in the Prologue of the Gospel of John. Reflection on those passages made a particular contribution to the understanding of the Incarnation and the Divine-Human nature of Jesus Christ and hence to the dogmas of Mary’s divine maternity and her virginity.

For the other two marian dogmas the New Testament evidence is not so clear. However, the dogmas of the Immaculate Conception and the Assumption at least do not contradict Scripture. These two dogmas are the fruit not only of Scripture study, but also (and primarily) of the church’s lived life of contemplation and worship through centuries.

Since Scripture is the primary source of all of our theology and since all of our Christian life and spirituality is rooted in Scripture and inspired by Scripture, I must turn to Scripture at least briefly.

The last and latest of the four gospels is the Gospel According to John. Perhaps it manifests the most mature New Testament reflection on the Blessed Virgin Mary’s place in the church and in Christian spirituality. I find that the fourth gospel makes a very helpful contribution to rediscovering Mary in our time and place.

Mary appears in John’s gospel in two places – at the wedding feast in Cana (John 2: 1-11) and at the Crucifixion on Calvary (John 19: 25-27), that is

⁷National Conference of Catholic Bishops (U.S.A.), *Behold Your Mother: Woman of Faith*. Washington: U.S. Catholic Conference, 1973, No. 60, p 22.

at the beginning and at the end of Jesus' public life and ministry. Mary is an *inclusio* for the working out of the salvation of the world; she has a role in God's saving work through Jesus Christ.

A. The water turned into wine at Cana is a sign of the abundance of God's gifts. It should be noted that wine is not a necessity of life! Wine is a special treat for times of celebration; it brings joy. This abundance of God's gifts at Cana comes about at Mary's request and initiative. Everything we teach and believe about Mary, and all the honour we pay to Mary is to lead us to her son Jesus. At Cana we see Mary literally pointing the servants to Jesus. And her words to the servants are really meant for all John's readers, for all disciples: "Do whatever he tells you."⁸ That is the essence of discipleship, and it is Mary who puts it into words in John's gospel. "Do whatever he tells you" – those are the last words of Mary recorded in the New Testament.

Mary the First Disciple and Model of Discipleship mediates the relationship with Jesus; she leads others to Jesus. And there is joy and celebration – a new spark to life. It is also important to notice in the Cana story that Mary the Disciple intercedes on behalf of the little ones. Cana is a poor little place, and the bride and groom seem to belong to God's little ones since they cannot even provide enough wine for their wedding.

Mary has a very intimate relationship with Jesus – she is his mother – and she has spent thirty years "treasuring all these things and pondering them in her heart."⁹ The mother of Jesus is immersed in the saving mysteries, and it has made her both attentive to the needs of the little ones and aware of the new possibilities there are in Jesus. And she acts out of this faith and hope to influence Jesus who brings about a change in the village of Cana. John tells us this is a sign of much greater things as the glory of Jesus is made manifest.

⁸John 2:5

⁹This is a recurring phrase in the infancy narrative in the Gospel of Luke.

As is typical of John the Evangelist, there is also a whole deeper level to the story of the Wedding at Cana. When we hear Jesus call his mother “Woman” most of us are a bit put off. But we need to recall chapter 2 of the Book of Genesis where the man (Adam) said: “This one shall be called ‘woman’.”¹⁰ And later we read: “The man called his wife Eve, because she became the mother of all the living.”¹¹ Calling his mother “Woman” Jesus connects her with Eve, one of the original human beings, the mother of all the living. Mary is not only the Model Disciple; she is a symbol of all humanity. When this symbol of humanity says, “They [we] have no wine”¹² she is speaking the deep longing in the human heart for joy and meaning and purpose. And this woman, the mother of Jesus, knows that Jesus can satisfy that longing. We are not left to our own resources; there is someone to whom we can turn – and it is Jesus. In communion with Jesus we can eventually find peace in the face of all our profound questions and longing.

At Cana, Mary, we might say, lets go of Jesus so that he can be for all people of all times and places. As one commentator put it, Mary “foregoes her privileged position as mother.... [and] her position as mother of Jesus in the flesh gives place to a spiritual motherhood of the faithful, and the ‘mother of Jesus’ becomes ‘woman’.”¹³

In a talk at the Redemptorist Renewal Center in Tucson AZ, Ron Rolheiser suggested that Jesus initially hesitated to perform this sign at Cana because he had not yet put his life on the line. That might be the meaning of “My hour has not yet come.”¹⁴

¹⁰Genesis 2:23

¹¹Genesis 3:20

¹²John 2:3

¹³McPolin, John. *John* in W. Harrington and D. Senior (eds), *New Testament Message*, Vol. 6. Wilmington: Michael Glazier, 1979, p. 59

¹⁴John 2:4

B. But by the time we get to John's passion narrative and the scene on Calvary, Jesus has certainly put his life on the line! In John 19: 15-27 Jesus is dying on the cross – and once again, the mother of Jesus is there. As Jesus entrusts Mary and John to one another he is reminding us again of his parting words and his last will and testament: “Love one another as I have loved you.”¹⁵ Followers and disciples of Jesus are people who love others. That is the one thing that can really make a difference in the world.

At the foot of the cross Mary becomes the mother of all disciples. “As the physical mother of Jesus, she had represented the people of Israel out of whom Jesus was born, but now that her physical motherhood is transformed, she represents a new people who are the church.”¹⁶

But this is the gospel of John, so there is more yet! Again, Jesus has called his mother “Woman”; she is not only mother of believers and disciples – she is mother of all humanity, mother of all the living. In this woman, all humanity stands by Jesus on the cross; and the death and resurrection of Jesus saves all humanity.

CONCLUSION

Perhaps Mary has fallen on hard times in some ways and in some places. However, reviewing what the church actually teaches about Mary and revisiting the New Testament regarding her brings us back to the good news that “God so loved the world that he gave his only Son, so that everyone who believes in him may not perish but may have eternal life.”¹⁷ The Blessed Virgin Mary (and devotion to her) can be an agent of the New Evangelization.

¹⁵John 15:12

¹⁶McPolin., 247

¹⁷John 3:16