

# MARY, MODEL OF THE CHURCH

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## Introduction

The rise of feminism in society and in the Church has created a crisis for all Christendom, across all denominations. Part of this crisis is seen in the call for the ordination of women to the priesthood, but the issue is a much wider and deeper one. It is a time of challenge requiring the Church to respond in a positive way by developing her doctrine on the place of man, and of woman, in the plan of God and in society. This essay is only an outline of one aspect of the direction we should perhaps take in developing a 'theology of gender' which is not restricted to an acceptance of what might be called 'unisexism', which eliminates the real differences in nature and vocation between the sexes in the plan of God. This is a relatively new theme for the Church, but I think that if we begin with a very old theme, that of 'Woman' in the New Testament, we may find clues towards an answer. That 'Woman' is Mary, the Mother of Jesus and the Model of the Church.

## 'The Mother of Jesus' in St John's Gospel

At first sight St John seems to say little about Mary. In his Gospel he only mentions her twice - at the marriage feast of Cana, and at the foot of the Cross. But these two occasions have enormous significance. We could say that the influence of Mary from these two scenes is, like that of any good woman or mother, all-pervasive and encompassing, but never intrusive or smothering.

The similarities between these two scenes of Cana and Calvary are threefold -in both Mary is 'Mother of Jesus'; in both she is addressed as 'Woman'; both refer to the 'hour' of Jesus. The two scenes show Mary present at the beginning and at the end of Jesus' public life, to signify her presence in everything he does.

## The Marriage Feast at Cana (John 2.1-12)

At the marriage feast of Cana, St John simply tells us that 'the Mother of Jesus was there', and that 'Jesus and his disciples had also been invited'. We see that in embryonic form the Church is therefore present with Jesus. When his Mother intercedes, Jesus says that 'his hour has not come yet!' Fr Andre Feuillet, commenting on this, suggests:

At Cana Jesus insinuates that when his Hour shall have come, the Hour of the Woman will also have come. Indeed, on Calvary when the Hour of Jesus did come, the Hour came too for Mary to become definitively a new mother of the living, the mother of all disciples of Jesus, represented here by St John.<sup>1</sup>

It has been pointed out that Mary's 'Do whatever he tells you' at Cana is parallel to her 'Be it done to me according to your word' at the Annunciation.<sup>2</sup> On both occasions she proclaims her obedience to God and to her Son, giving a strong hint that she is already the New Eve, by her obedience to God reversing the sin of the first woman.

This theme of the New Eve is confirmed by the expression used by Jesus at Cana. He calls his Mother 'Woman'. This is a very formal expression for a son to use of his mother. It is rare in Scripture, and it refers back to the 'Woman' in Genesis 3.15 who in prophecy is seen as an enemy of Satan, and whose Son will 'crush your head'. Also, from the Cross Jesus, the New Adam, will again call her 'Woman'. Mary is indeed, like Eve but in a completely new way, 'the Mother of all the living' (Gen.3.20), Mother of the Church, and Mother of us all on Calvary. In fact the early Fathers of the Church already referred to her as the New Eve:

... Eve is by an angel tempted to flee from God, so Mary received the Good News by an angel's message to bear God within her. Eve disobeyed God, Mary obeyed ...' (St Irenaeus, AD140)<sup>3</sup>

Death by Eve, Life by Mary ...: said St Jerome<sup>4</sup>

### **The Eucharistic Banquet between Christ and the Church**

Cana is also significant because it recalls the prophecy that when the Messiah comes there will be an abundance of new wine, and of grain.<sup>5</sup> The wine is the sign of the Messiah and of the New Covenant that he brings. So too is the multiplication of the loaves in John 6.

The marriage banquet also evokes the Banquet between God and Daughter Zion, his People - 'As a young man rejoices over a virgin, so will your God rejoice over you' (Isaiah 62.5). So Christ's love for his Church is seen in the New Covenant in his blood on the Cross. There are clearly eucharistic connotations here, since the Eucharist is the covenant banquet between Christ and his Church. The Church is always seen as *the female principle*, and we begin to see that Mary at Cana represents the Church in its union with Christ, her complete faith and obedience personifying the motherhood of the Church. I think we can therefore say that in the plan of God there is a *Marian profile of the Church*, so that while at the Holy Eucharist the male priest represents Christ, every woman in her relationship to Christ represents Mary and the Church.

Many commentators have also noted that at Cana it is significant that Mary's faith *precedes* that of the disciples, and leads to their faith. Through Mary's faith and Mary's prayers the miracle is worked, and St John says that Jesus 'manifested his glory and his disciples *believed in Him*.<sup>6</sup>

Concerning this theme Pope John Paul II says:

The Virgin Mary is the archetype of the Church because of the divine maternity. Just like Mary, the Church must be Mother and Virgin ... the Marian profile of the Church precedes that of the Petrine (the Apostles), without being in any way divided from it or being less complementary.<sup>7</sup>

### **Mary at the Foot of the Cross**

Like the scene at Cana, the scene of Mary at Calvary depicted by St John is deeply significant. Mary in perfect faith and love, personifying the Church, shares in her Son's Redemption by her presence with him, sharing his sufferings as only a mother can. Fr André Feuillet says:

It is as if Jesus' passion and Mary's compassion amount to but one reality ... as in the prophecy of Simeon ... Jesus remains the unique Saviour of mankind, but the sufferings of his Mother are inseparable from his own sufferings.<sup>8</sup>

Christ is the New Adam, Mary is the New Eve, fulfilling Genesis 3.15. Christ's hour has come in his conflict with evil, and the Church is born. Fr André Feuillet comments:

Mary appears as the perfect model of the Church. Mary's 'yes', which was necessary for the realisation of the mystery of the Redemptive Incarnation, is

the archetype of the 'yes' the Church must ceaselessly give to Christ her Spouse... The Church, like Mary, is the spiritual Mother of all who are born to the life of grace ... like Mary, the Church surrounds Christians with her maternal love. St John presents for our contemplation the symbols of blood and water, the Church being born from Christ's side pierced by a lance, the two fundamental sacraments of the new covenant, the water of baptism and the blood of eucharist, through which the fruits of Calvary are communicated to us by the Church ... like Mary, the Church is the new Eve, the new Mother of the living.<sup>9</sup>

And Tertullian said:

If Adam was the figure of Christ, the sleep of Adam was the death of Christ; he slept in death so that Eve coming forth from the wound in his side might prefigure the Church, the true Mother of the living.<sup>10</sup>

*Woman, this is your son'* - Mary, in accepting John, the newly-ordained bishop, accepts those who guide the Church and take the place of Christ her Son in the Church:

St Ephraem says that each of these two figures sees Christ in the other. In Mary, John sees the perfect [human] origin of his beloved Master; in John, Mary sees the embodiment of him whom her Son had loved and still loves, and who did his best to reciprocate this love.<sup>11</sup>

*'This is your Mother'* - John takes Mary to 'his own home'. So the Church will always have devotion to Mary, who is the icon of the Church herself, and so there should therefore always be a shrine to Mary in all our churches. 'One cannot be a beloved disciple of Jesus, like John, without accepting Mary as Mother.'<sup>12</sup>

We can say that at every Mass, the great priestly prayer of Christ, Mary is present with us all as she was at Calvary. Pope John Paul II has spoken of this scene of Mary at Calvary:

It is the gesture of the world's Redeemer who assigns Mary, as 'Woman', a role of new motherhood to all those who are called to the Church. Mary is 'consecrated' Mother of the Church by her Son on the Cross ... Jesus wishes to include among those things 'accomplished' this gift of his Mother to the Church and to the world...

From the Cross Jesus lays the foundation of Marian devotion in the Church, to which he makes known through John his will that Mary should receive a filial love from every disciple whose Mother she is by the decision of Jesus himself. The importance of Marian devotion is deduced from Jesus' words at the hour of his death...<sup>13</sup>

## Mary - Model of the Church in its Approach to Christ

In his Apostolic Exhortation *Marialis Cultus* Pope Paul VI took up a theme from the Vatican II document on the Church which said:

In the mystery of the Church which is rightly, called mother and virgin, the Blessed Virgin Mary has taken precedence because of the eminence and uniqueness of the example she offers as virgin and mother. By her belief and obedience she gave birth on earth to the very Son of the Father, and this with no knowledge of man, under the shadow of the Holy Spirit. She was like the new Eve presenting a faith unadulterated by doubt, not to the serpent of old, but to God's messenger ... [The Church] is imitating her Lord's Mother by the power of the Holy Spirit when she keeps a virginal guard on the integrity of her faith, the firmness of her hope and the sincerity of her love ... The Church in the glory she gives to Christ is gaining a greater resemblance to her Type [Model] on high...<sup>14</sup>

Pope Paul showed five ways in which Mary personified Holy Mother Church. The thoughts that follow are based, though not exclusively, on these five ways.<sup>15</sup>

*i) Mary is the Faithful Virgin.* 'Full of faith, conceiving Christ in her mind before conceiving Him in her womb, she said, "I am the handmaid of the Lord".<sup>16</sup> Mary ponders these things in her heart.

*The Church.* At Mass, the Church, like Mary, listens to and ponders the Word of God, accepts it, and teaches the faithful ('Do whatever he tells you').

*ii) Mary is the Virgin at Prayer.* In the Magnificat, Mary prays, 'My soul glorifies the Lord, my spirit rejoices in God my Saviour ...', and at Cana Mary's prayer causes Christ to work his first miracle.

*The Church,* like Mary, praises God unceasingly. She prays with Mary every day at Evening Prayer in the Magnificat. At Mass, the Church is at prayer together with Mary, who is mentioned in most Eucharistic Prayers, Eastern and Western.

*iii) Mary is the Virgin-Mother.* Mary gives birth to Christ at Bethlehem, and on Calvary she gives birth to-the Church of Christ.

*The Church,* like Mary, brings Christ to birth in souls in the waters of Baptism. The Church ministers the Bread of Life to souls at Mass, and gives him to all in the sacraments.

*iv) Mary is the Virgin Presenting Offerings.* Mary presents her Son Jesus in the Temple, where Simeon prophesies that a sword will pierce her soul. She offers the fruit

of her womb to reconcile us all to God. At the foot of the Cross she offers Christ to his Father in sacrifice. 'Offer your Son, Holy Virgin, and present to the Lord the blessed fruit of your womb, the holy victim pleasing to God' said St Bernard.<sup>17</sup>

*The Church*, like Mary, offers Christ in the Mass to the Father. We offer Christ in union with Mary, the Virgin Mother of God. It would therefore seem to me very appropriate to stress that at the Offertory only women and girls should bring up the gifts, in imitation of Mary who gives her body that Christ may come among us. In this way the Marian profile of the Church is shown forth. It would also seem appropriate to have Marian hymns at the Offertory.<sup>18</sup>

v) *Mary is the Teacher and Exemplar of the Spiritual Life*. Mary does God's will at all times, and brings Christ into the world. Her abiding fruitfulness is the result of her obedience to God's will - 'I am the handmaid of the Lord: be it done to me according to your word'.

*The Church*, in imitating Mary and following God's will in Christ, brings salvation to the world. We surely need today to follow Christ's teaching in its fulness in imitation of Mary in her faith and in her prayer-life in the midst of the Church.

To sum up this theme, we could say that the Church, which throughout history has always been referred to as female in principle, is like Mary because she gives birth to Christ, suffers with him on earth, and like Mary will be glorified with him in the next life. From this I think we can say that *while the priest at every Mass takes the place of Christ, the male, the presence of every woman at Mass symbolises and represents both Mary and the Church, Virgin and Mother, in their relationship to Christ.*

### **Blessed Isaac of Stella on Mary and the Church**

In the twelfth century an English monk, abbot of the Monastery of Stella, near Poitiers in France, foreshadowed this teaching on Mary as Model of the Church. This classic passage is referred to in the document *Lumen Gentium* of Vatican II.<sup>19</sup> The key part of his thought is given below:

The one Christ, the unique and whole Christ, is the head and the members ... As the head and members are only one Son, yet, at the same time, being many sons, so Mary and the Church are at once one mother and several, one virgin and several ... that is why in the divinely inspired Scriptures, what is said of the Church, virgin-mother, in the collective sense is valid for Mary in the individual sense, and that which is said of Mary, virgin-mother, one may with good reason understand in a general manner of the Church, virgin-mother.<sup>20</sup>



## Mary in the Mystery of the Covenant

A great deal more could be said on this magnificent theme. In fact, many writers are now exploring the role of the sexes in the plan of God. Cardinal de Lubac wrote his book *The Motherhood of the Church*<sup>21</sup> to show that Catholic tradition has a great body of teaching that needs to be recovered, so that a one-sided perspective on the Church may not prevail, and so that we may bring out not only the male aspect of God's plan in determining us, but also the feminine seen especially in the person of Mary.

Fr Ignace de la Potterie in a recent book has brought this out beautifully:

The profound structure of the mystery of Mary is the very structure of the Covenant, seen from the side of humanity whom Mary represents. In the pact that God wishes to conclude with his People, in the communion that Christ wishes to realise with the Church, the human partner of God, the human partner of God and of Christ has been the Daughter of Zion, that is, first Israel, then Mary, and finally the Church. Mary thus becomes the image, the figure, the total People of God in its relationship with God.<sup>22</sup>

Fr de la Potterie also makes an important point about our perspective on the Church:

In the Western world, the Church is perceived as a male organisation wherein women do not play a central role. Too much emphasis has been placed on the institutional and masculine character of the Church, so that its 'Marian face', its 'feminine and maternal face', the mystical face of the Church, tends to be obscured ... Both aspects are of essential and fundamental importance for a balanced, and biblically based, theology of the Church ...<sup>23</sup>

## Jesus and Mary: Male and Female in the Plan of God

It is not possible in this short article to outline other aspects of this subject of the unique vocation and role of Mary as the Model and Icon of the Church. The reader is referred to the bibliography at the end. Many of the authors mentioned there also refer to the vision of the Woman with the crown of twelve stars and with the sun and moon at her feet in Revelation 12. The Woman is Mary, the twelve stars are both Israel and the Church, and Mary is the Queen' of all creation. For me, the perspective in the writings of Fr Edward Holloway, which sees the division of the sexes in the plan of God as intended for the Incarnation, is an enthralling one.<sup>24</sup> If we accept the Scotist view of the Incarnation that, even apart from original sin, the universe was only created for Christ, then, - as actually happened in evolution, the sexes were split (Genesis 2.21-22, 'rib' translated as 'sexual principle') in the 'deep sleep' of 'Adam', that is, during life before the advent of Man, so that there will be the 'Woman', that which is determined, representing creation, Eve, Daughter Zion, and finally, and supremely Mary, the new Eve. This 'Woman' *will* be directly determined by God to

bring forth the one expected from the creation of the world, and who must be of the male sex, Jesus our Saviour and our Redeemer. The sexual order is ultimately therefore based on the very order of creation and the Incarnation, and we, each of us, bear in our sexuality the very signs of the plan of God in Christ.

Whilst agreeing with Fr de la Potterie above on the need for a balanced vision of the Church, I fear that there is a danger that we are moving rapidly from a patriarchal to a matriarchal view of the sexes. People today are already talking about the 'redundant male'. We need to recapture the Christian vision that both sexes have distinct but complementary roles to play in God's plan. Unisexism does justice to neither sex. As St Augustine reminds us:

*Men, despise not yourselves: the Son of God became a man; despise not yourselves, women; the Son of God was born of a woman.*<sup>25</sup>

### **Living this Reality in the Church**

This vision of the role of the sexes is vitally necessary if we are to renew our unique vocations as men and as women in the Church and in society. At one level the ordained priest is Jesus (represented by John) at the heart of the Church, and the consecrated woman is Mary at the heart of the Church. This unique female vocation to live out and to represent that dynamic and all-pervasive Marian role desperately needs to be developed. Mother Teresa, asked why women may not be priests, said quite simply, 'because Mary was not a priest.' At another level, that of marriage, a vocation which is also collapsing rapidly, we need once more to return to our roots. As St Paul teaches, the man represents Christ and the woman the Church, for 'this mystery has many implications; but I am saying that it refers to Christ and the Church' (Eph 5.32).

Like Mary, we must ponder these important things in our minds and in our hearts, and ask her to help us to follow her Son and his plan for us, as males and as females. I would like to leave the last words to the Fathers of the Church:

*St Cyprian: He alone can have God as his Father who first has the Church as his Mother.*<sup>27</sup>

*And finally St Ambrose: May the heart of Mary be in every Christian to proclaim the greatness of the Lord: may her spirit be in everyone to exult in God our Saviour.*<sup>28</sup>

## NOTES

1. André Feuillet, *Jesus and His Mother* (St Bede's, 1984) p 8
2. Feuillet, op cit, p 10
3. Ep.22,21; PL 22, 408
4. *Adv. Haereses* Bk 5,19,1: 20.2 (*Divine Office*, Advent week 2, Friday, Readings)
5. Cf Amos 9.13-14; Joel 2.23-24; 3.18
6. Cf Feuillet, op cit, p 124
7. *Address to Cardinals*, 22/12/87, para 2 (*L'Osservatore Romano*, 11/1/88)
8. Feuillet, op cit, p 125
9. Feuillet, op cit, p 210
10. *De Anima*, 43, PL 2, 743B
11. Hans Urs von Balthasar, *Mary for Today*, (St Paul's, 1987) p 52
12. Joseph Paredes, *Mary and the Kingdom of God*, (St Paul's, 1990) p 120
13. *General Audience*, 23 / 11 / 88 para 4,5,7
14. *Lumen Gentium* 63,64,65
15. *Marialis Cultus*, (1974), Nos 17-21
16. St Augustine, *Sermo*, 215,4: PL 38, 1074 (*Marialis Cultus*, 17)
17. *In Purificatione B. Mariae*, Sermo 111, 2: PL 38, 183, 370 (*Marialis Cultus*, 20)
18. The theological reasons supporting this practice are argued coherently in the pamphlet by Fr Edward Holloway, *Servers at Mass: A Place for Girls?* (Faith Pamphlets, 1992, obtainable from 'Meadowsweet', Breach lane, Shaftesbury, SP7 8LF). This practice has been working successfully in my own parish in Folkestone for three years.
19. Reference 191 of *Lumen Gentium*
20. *Serer.* 51; PL 194, 1863A (*Cf Divine Office*, Advent week 2 Saturday, Readings)
21. Henri de Lubac, *The Motherhood of the Church*, (Ignatius, 1982)
22. Ignace de la Potterie, *Mary in the Mystery of the Covenant*, (Alba House, 1992) p 265
23. de la Potterie, op cit, p 229-233
24. Edward Holloway, *Sexual Order and Holy Order*, (Faith Pamphlets 1975) passim. See also Fr Holloway's Faith Pamphlet *Servers at Mass: A Place for Girls?* and his book *Catholicism: A New Synthesis*, (Faith-Keyway, 1976), pp 128-130, 148-150. (All available as in note 18 above)
25. *De Agone Christi*, 11 (cf Aquinas, ST III, 31, 4, ad 1)
26. Quoted in a letter to the *Catholic Herald*, 25/2/94
27. *Epist* 74, c 7 (De Lubac, op cit, p 49)
28. *On St Luke's Gospel*, Bk 2, 26-27 (*Divine Office*, 21 December, Readings)

## FURTHER READING

*The following are some of the works which outline the role of Mary, and of women, in the Church in the context of today's questions, and which are attempting to develop this doctrine of Mary, the Model of the Church.*

Bouyer, Louis, *Woman in the Church* (Ignatius 1979) Cantalamessa, Raniero, *Mary, Mirror of the Church* (Liturgical Press, 1992) de la Potterie, Ignace, *Mary in the Mystery of the Covenant* (Alba House, 1992) de Lubac, Henri, *The Motherhood of the Church* (Ignatius, 1982) °Feuillet, André, *Jesus and His Mother* (St Bede's, 1984) Hauke, Manfred, *Women and the Priesthood* (Ignatius, 1986) Holloway, Edward, *Servers at Mass: A Place for Girls?* (Faith Pamphlets, 1992) Holloway, Edward, *Sexual Order and Holy Order* (Faith Pamphlets, 1975) John Paul II, Encyclical Letter, *Redemptoris Mater*, (1988) John Paul II, Apostolic Letter, *Mulieris Dignitatem*, (1988) John Paul II, General Audience Address 23/11/88, 'Behold Your Mother'. Lafrance, Jean, *In Prayer with Mary the Mother of Jesus* (St Paul's, 1988) Leonard, Graham, *Mother of Christ, Bride of Christ* (Ecumenical Soc. BVM, 1993) Paredes, Joseph, *Mary and the Kingdom of God* (St Paul's, 1990) Paul VI; Apostolic Exhortation, *Marialis Cultus*, (1974) Ratzinger, Cardinal Joseph, *Daughter Zion* (Ignatius, 1983) Ratzinger, Cardinal Joseph and others, *The Church and Women* (Ignatius, 1988) Saward, John, *Redeemer in the Womb* (Ignatius 1993) von Balthasar, Hans Urs, *Mary' for Today* (St Paul's, 1987)

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