

## Mary and our Image of God - Part 1 of 6 - Disciple and Mother

### Introduction

Throughout history Mary, the mother of Jesus, has been the source of endless fascination for Christians. In the years since Vatican II we have seen Mary celebrated as a woman, as one who journeys by faith as we do, as a role-model for feminists – or its opposite, and even as a challenge to patriarchal religion. Mary has been the topic in two major writings by popes, *Marialis Cultus*, 1974 (Paul VI) and *Redemptoris Mater*, 1987 (John Paul II). Many times and cultures have demonstrated different appreciations of this unique figure in our Christian tradition. From the fifth century came the feast of her Dormition or ‘falling asleep’. In our century has she fallen asleep in our faith life, our liturgy, our homilies, or is she in the process of awakening in us and for us?

### Disciple and Mother

Throughout history Mary has been honoured as the New Testament disciple par excellence of Jesus, who was also his mother. Along with her personal involvement in the birth of Jesus is her own lifelong journey of faith through a life that was most certainly not an easy one. It peaks of brutal oppression and the displacement of flight and exile. Since early times there have been distortions when Mary slipped the bounds of creature-hood and either competed with her Son as mediator or even replaced him. Vatican II corrected this with a healthy reminder that Mary’s role is seen to be not separate from the mystery of Christ and the Church but rather integrated within them, one with the human race in need of salvation.

Given this balance, hard won as it was, several issues remain unresolved at the level of Mary in an ecumenical context, the declining interest in the figure of Mary especially in the Western world while other areas continue an ever growing Marian emphasis as though Vatican II’s corrective never took place. One reason for this needs consideration, the symbolic force of her figure as a female representation that bears images of God otherwise excluded from mainline Christian perception of God as Father, Son and Spirit, Sandra Schneider’s ‘Two men and a bird’.

### Can a Mother forget her child?

Images of God as female are, arguably necessary for the full expression of the mystery of God but are suppressed from official formulations. Not surprisingly, these have migrated to the figure of this woman. In devotion to her as a close, compassionate mother who will not let one of her children be lost, we have mediated a most appealing experience of God. Mary, it may be argued, has embodied aspects of divine reality best symbolised in female form. For multitudes of believers the person of this woman has functioned to reveal divine love as merciful, close, interested, always ready to hear and respond to human needs, inspiring trust, and profoundly attractive. This has happened to a degree not possible when one thinks of God simply as a ruling male person or persons.

We need to take a further step beyond identifying the issue. It is to retrieve those elements in the Marian symbol which properly belong to the divine reality and them as God imaged as female. If Mary reflects the feminine face of God, then Marian theology and devotion have a contribution to make towards the crucial task of imaging God in inclusive fashion. This incorporates doctrinal, ecumenical, and feminist interests. Two positives that emerge

would be imaging God as a female acting subject and retrieving Mary as a genuine woman whose life was a journey of faith. All women have an unsurpassable dignity as human beings made in the image of God, a truth that struggles to come to expression in theory and practice, and is demanded as an act of justice.

### **Resulting Perspectives**

Three positives that emerge would be first a more adequate theology of God; then the Marian tradition itself would be redirected and refreshed; and finally one obstacle to the Church becoming a community of equal disciples would be diminished. The holy mystery of God transcends all images and concepts, but God's created world, of nature and humanity, women and men, can separately or together, serve as metaphor, analogy, or symbol pointing to, naming, and evoking the divine mystery. Clearly the Christian tradition's patriarchal bias has short changed the fullness of religious language and images of the divine. Teilhard de Chardin was convinced that the cult of Mary served to satisfy an "irresistible Christian need" in the Church, namely, the need to correct "a dreadfully masculinised" conception of the Godhead.

We need to recognise honestly how much our God language is the result of patriarchy and is subject to reform, to give back to God what belongs to God and allow the figure of Mary to no longer bear the burden of keeping alive female imagery of the divine. Scripture, doctrine and liturgy reflect the Marian tradition but this is not to say that Mary represents the feminine dimension of the divine, or that certain human characteristics are presented as masculine or feminine. The flaw in such an approach is evident when one considers that Mary no more reveals the feminine dimension of God than Jesus reveals the masculine dimension of God. God does not have a feminine or masculine dimension, or an animal dimension (a mother bird protecting her young), nor a mineral dimension (God is my rock).

### **Conclusion**

Female imagery of God has the capacity to represent God not only as nurturing, although certainly that, but as powerful, initiating, creating-redeeming-saving, and victorious over the powers of this world. If women are created in the image of God, then God can be imaged in female metaphors in as full and as limited a way as God is imaged in male ones, without talk of feminine dimensions or sides or traits reducing the impact of this imagery.

The path that lies ahead of us in retrieving images of the divine from the Marian tradition, the Mary-God connection, will take us through history, the development of theology, prayer and poetry, art and literature through the ages. Out of this journey emerged a consensus that there is indeed an intrinsic relationship between the figure of Mary that has developed in the Christian tradition and the idea of God which we will explore in future.

### **Reference:**

Johnson, E. A. (1989). *Mary and the Image of God*, in Donnelly, D. *Mary, Woman of Nazareth*. Paulist Press: Mahwah, NJ.

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