

Mary and our Image of God - Part 3 of 6 - Mary Refuge of Sinners

Scholasticism vs. Popular Piety

Medieval Europe saw extensive growth in popular devotion along with some more learned thinking about Mary. Yet by the sixteenth century her figure had taken on attributes of divinity, this time taken not from the ancient goddess but from the Christian Trinity itself. The Protestant Reformation was rightly critical of this development and Catholic reformers sought to correct it. A more recent perspective has perceived in it all a quest for religious experience through the feminine image, an experience not available through the idea of God at the time.

It was a complex time with Hellenistic thought patterns producing a scholastic system in which the female/maternal was and had to be totally absent from God. Basic to this was the idea that the maternal was passive and receptive while God was pure act, and only the active power of the masculine/paternal could be allowed to enter the notion of 'him.'

Salvation by a Thread

On a popular level medieval devotion to Mary may be attributed to theology's emphasis on the transcendent justice of God that made it impossible for God to forgive sin without demanding satisfaction, very much in line with the influence of the theology of St Anselm. God is imaged as a righteous judge and sinners felt that their salvation was a precarious thing with the temptations of Satan ever-present and the danger of eternal torment in hell very real. In this scenario, the divine saving quality of mercy found its expression in the womanly figure of Mary, who could be trusted as a mother to understand her children's sinful inadequacies, and plead their case before her son.

Alongside theology's distortion was the social reality of the hard and dangerous life lived by great numbers of people who found in their mother someone who would be interested and help not only with the blessing of salvation but with everyday earthly blessings as well. As a result enormous veneration was poured out towards Mary with multiplication of feasts, prayers, relics, titles, works of art, shrines, cathedrals, pilgrimages, stories of miracles.

In the process Mary not only paralleled and even outshone God the Father but also God the Son. Anselm was to write, "So God the Father of all created things, and Mary is the mother of all recreated things."

Rewriting Prayer and Scripture

This re-creation theme entered into the rewriting of psalms in which Mary was substituted for God as the acting subject of divine deeds to be praised by the recipients: Psalm 96 which praises God was now expressed as, "*Sing to Our Lady a new song, for she has done wonderful things. In the sight of the nations she has revealed her mercy; her name is heard even to the ends of the earth*".

Even the standard hymn of divine praise, the *Te Deum*, was refashioned to honour Mary: "*We praise thee, O Mother of God; we confess thee, Mary ever Virgin... Thee all angels and*

archangels, thrones and principalities serve. Thee all powers of heaven and all dominions obey. Before thee all the angelic choirs, the cherubim and seraphim, exulting stand. With unceasing voice every angelic creature proclaims thee: Holy, holy, holy, Mary Virgin Mother of God”.

In time, Mary was gifted with the infinite knowledge and understanding, the power of God over earth, heaven and hell. What the Bible said of God the Father was said of Mary: ‘she so loved the world that she gave her only son’ (John 3:16). She could be prayed to as ‘Our Mother who art in heaven’, and be asked to ‘give us each day our daily bread’. Of course, there were moments of critical reflection that insisted that these and similar honours belonged to God who had so honoured Mary. Yet this kind of devotion to the mother of God was actually devotion to God the Mother, the ultimate mystery of the creative and re-creative God glimpsed in female form.

Mary, Mother of Mercy

It was in the area of the redemptive activity of Jesus that Mary’s parallelism with divine reality grew strong. While Jesus was acknowledged as gracious Saviour, his function of judging often overshadowed the quality of his mercy, which was in turn attributed abundantly to Mary. St. Bonaventure taught that the kingdom of God was divided into two zones, justice and mercy. Mary had the better part because she was made queen of mercy, while her son was king of justice, and ‘mercy is better than justice.’ Out of this rose the dreadful portrayal of Mary depicted as restraining Christ’s wrath, placing back into his sheath his sword which was raging against sinful humanity.

As the period progressed, Mary went from being merciful mediatrix with the just judge to being sharer of common dominion with Christ through the pain she suffered on Calvary, and then to power over the mercy of Christ whom she commanded by her maternal authority. Theologians of the Middle Ages wrote of her what the Bible wrote of Christ: *in her was the fullness of the Godhead* (Colossians 2:9); *of her fullness we have all received* (John 1:16); *because she emptied herself God has highly exalted her, so that at her name every knee should bow* (Philippians 2:5-11).

Parallels between Mary and Christ in nature, grace and glory, in virtue and dignity, resulted in the figure of Mary assuming divine privileges. All power as co-redemptrix, mediatrix, queen and mother of mercy resided in Mary as a maternal woman, who could be trusted to understand and cope with human weakness better than a testy God the Father or a just Jesus Christ. In her person she represented ultimate graciousness against divine severity.

In putting together this somewhat negative assessment of distortions in Mariology, my purpose has been to help us understand where we have come from. This is an important goal given both the imminence of Pope Francis’ Year of Mercy and the Synod on Family. The great mercy of God, the merciful Christ, a merciful Church, and a merciful Mary are in harmony rather than opposition.

Source

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