

Mary and our Image of God - Part 4 of 6 - Mary Mother of Mercy

From Jesus to Mary

Medieval times left an image of divine severity that was countered by ultimate graciousness represented Mary as recipient of the sinners' basic trust and affection. Despite the abuses that led to such a perspective, late medieval Mariology demonstrates the capacity of female imagery to model the redemptive activity of God. What had happened was the transfer to Mary of Christ's attribute of mercy; the figure of Mary functioned as a female image of Christ's mercy. Mediatrix offered a female icon of Christ's role as intercessor. Mary's unflinching compassion and will to save modeled the good news of salvation in the figure of a woman.

While the distortions were very real, yet that they happened demonstrates that the Marian tradition breaks the boundaries of biblical and traditional faith, compensating for an over-masculinised and harsh concept of God. Post-reformation Roman Catholic tradition did develop from here to clarify the priority of God and the centrality of Christ in the mystery of salvation. Yet there was still room to attribute to Mary an important function in the revelation of God's love.

Mary, Mother of the Redeemer

Ten years before Vatican II, Edward Schillebeeckx in an influential work, reasoned that while God's love is both paternal and maternal, the latter quality cannot be explicitly clarified through the male Jesus. Thus God chose Mary so the maternal aspect of divine love might be represented in her person. All that is tender, mild, simple, generous, gentle, and sweet in God is manifest in her.

As partner to Christ she expresses in her figure as woman God's maternal redeeming love: *Mary is the translation and effective expression in maternal terms of God's mercy, grace and redeeming love which manifested itself to us in a visible and tangible form in the person of Christ, our Redeemer.* [pp. 113-114 *Mary, Mother of the Redeemer.* Sheed & Ward. 1964 ed.].

The interesting feature of the quotation is the number of active verbs to express a relationship that Mary represents which expresses something of God which Schillebeeckx thinks cannot be seen as coming to light in Jesus Christ. The need to express the feminine and maternal aspect of divine love needs expression through the revelatory capacity of the figure of this woman. I do not think we would treat the topic in the same way today, given a better understanding of Christology and male and female identities, but the issue itself stands as testimony to the need for something more than is expressed in a patriarchal view of the revelation of God in Christ and the fulfilling of that need in the person of Mary.

Schillebeeckx's reduction of the feminine to the maternal and of the maternal to mildness and sweetness is highly questionable in light of the experience of the reality of women's lives and of feminist reflection. Yet Schillebeeckx was searching for envisioning God's saving reality in all its fullness. His approach was shaped in the context of counter-reformation Mariology, expressing aspects of divine saving reality in the figure of Mary.

Ecumenism and Vatican II

In the ecumenical climate since Vatican II a more precise analysis of the function of Mary has become the focus of attention. Theologians such as Rene Laurentin, Yves Congar, and Cardinal Suenens have paid careful attention to the Protestant critique that in the Catholic tradition the action and experience of Mary has substituted in a particular way for the action and experience of God the Holy Spirit. Catholics have said of Mary that she forms Christ in them, that she is spiritually present to guide and inspire, that she is the link between themselves and Christ, and that one goes to Jesus through her. But are not these precisely the roles of the Spirit of Christ?

In addition, Mary has been called intercessor, advocate, defender, consoler, and counselor – precisely the roles which belong to the Holy Spirit in John 14:16 and 26; 15:26; 16:7. Leo XIII said that, “*Every grace granted to man has three degrees in order: for by God it is communicated to Christ, from Christ it passes to the Virgin, and from the Virgin it descends to us. (Lucunda semper #5)*. Is not this a dislocation of the Holy Spirit who is essential to the Trinitarian gift of grace?

What Protestants universally attribute to the action of the Holy Spirit was attributed to Mary, a critique that is basically substantiated. Marian development occupied spaces left vacant by undeveloped study of the Holy Spirit in post-tridentine theology. It is also indicative of a lack of attention to the Scriptures in the pre-Vatican II church.

Essential Scripture

The Gospels show the obvious primacy of the Spirit where Mary is over-shadowed by, filled with, made fruitful by, and enabled to prophesy in the power of the Spirit. The privileged sign and witness of the Holy Spirit in the community of the Church is the person of Mary. From the time of the Church Fathers the Holy Spirit was pictured as Mother in early Syriac Christianity.

The Spirit’s image was that of the brooding or hovering mother bird, mothering Jesus into life at his conception and into mission at his baptism and bringing believers to birth and mission in the waters of baptism.

An early memory I have of an altar picture is that of the mother pelican cutting her breast with her bill to shed the nourishing blood to feed her chicks (the sixth verse of Aquinas’ hymn *Adoro to devote* refers to this legendary feature – *Jesus, pelican of mercy*). The motherhood image eventually accrued to the church itself (‘holy mother church’).

Source

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

Schillebeeckx, E. (1964). *Mary, Mother of the Redemption: The religious bases of the mystery of Mary*. Sheed & Ward: NY.

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