

## Mary and our Image of God - Part 5 of 6 - Mary the Liberator

### As it Was

We finished the last piece with the motherhood of the Spirit that was expressed in prayer:

*As the wings of doves over their nestling,  
And the mouths of their nestlings towards their mouths,  
So also are the wings of the Spirit over my heart.*

This motherhood image shifted to the Church as holy mother and to Mary as she became the bearer of profoundly important characteristics of God.

Throughout the three periods we have looked at historical origins, medieval over-development, and post-reformation systematization. Connections have been made between the figure of Mary and the idea of God in both popular piety and theological reflection without any hard and fast distinction between the two. In each period the figure of Mary has taken on characteristics of the creating, saving and sanctifying God, the three aspects we associate with Father, Son, and Spirit.

In Latin American Catholicism, massive devotion to Mary is one of its most persistent and original characteristics. In contemporary liberation theology, the enduring devotion of powerless, defeated, and poor people to the dark-skinned, sorrowful Madonna who sings her liberation song, the Magnificat, signals Mary's identification with the oppressed in the name of God. This expressly validates the dignity of each downtrodden person and draws out energy for resistance against dominating powers.

### Our Lady of Guadalupe

The liberation of the downtrodden is accompanied by the liberation of a restrictive idea of God. Devotion to Our Lady of Guadalupe involved resistance by conquered people not only to the European invaders, but to the male God in whose name they conquered. As with the origin of the Marian cult in the fourth century, analysis of this Mexican cult supports this contention.

The place of the original apparition was the site of an ancient temple dedicated to Tonantzin, the Indian virgin mother of the gods. The flowers and music of the vision were part of Tonantzin's temple worship. The dark skin of the woman and the language she spoke, the colours she was wearing and the celestial symbols surrounding her were all reminiscent of the goddess of the defeated people. Yet it was not Tonantzin who was appearing, but the virgin mother of the Christian God.

The figure of Our Lady of Guadalupe set within the complex of Christian doctrine combined the Indian female expression of God, which the Spanish tried to wipe out as diabolical, with the Spanish male expression of God which the Indians found incomprehensible as everything in their vision of the cosmos had a male and female component. Each understanding of God was expanded by the other, enriching the very understanding of the selfhood of God.

The cult of Our Lady of Guadalupe mediates the compassionate reality of God in the form of a woman. The figure of Guadalupe is a living focus of female imagery of the divine.

### **The Human Embodiment of the Holy Spirit**

That the Holy Spirit came upon Mary in a unique way is clear from the Annunciation account. The union is so profound that the Spirit can be said to have taken flesh in the Virgin Mary, who in turn personifies the Spirit. As such, her figure as a woman is a revelation of characteristics usually associated with the Spirit of God, such as all-encompassing warmth and love, immediate presence, inspiring energy, intimacy, and care for the weak and little ones.

Over time the image of a remote and judgmental patriarchal God became set. Mary became the beloved 'other face' of God, the figure who bore the life-giving, compassionate, caring, saving, and closely intimate qualities so characteristic of the Abba whom Jesus preached. While the distinction was maintained between adoration of God and veneration of Mary, on the affective and imaginative level, the Catholic child experienced the love of God and the saving mystery of divine reality in the figure of this woman. The divine was spoken of in female terms, images and symbols.

A compassion-oriented Mariology is directly related to an over-emphasised masculinised image of God, and functions as a remedy for what is lacking in such an image. Clearly now those qualities should be transferred back to the God who is their source so the divine reality is compassionate, intimate, and caring, and is to be imaged in both female as well as male representations. Again, we see the timely call for a Year of Mercy that puts before us such a God –such a Mary – and, we hope with Pope Francis, such a Church.

### **Source**

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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Note – the first apparition occurred in 1531. The feast day of Our Lady of Guadalupe is 12 December.