

Mary in Culture - Part 5 of 9 - Cultural Perspectives

Cultural Orientations

Mediterranean culture has strong affinity to the present moment, what we see in Jesus' advice, "Don't worry about what you will eat or drink" (Lk 12:29). The cultural obligation of the farmer with the bumper crop was to distribute it rather than store it up (Lk 12:15-21). When Mary learns from the angel about the pregnancy of Elizabeth she responds 'in haste' to visit her, a spontaneous and immediate reaction, one proper to the present moment. We saw this earlier when Jesus, instead of travelling home with father, kin, or acquaintances, elected to accept the challenge of the present moment to sit among the stimulating teachers in the Temple and engage them in discussion, totally oblivious of other duties. Peasants in Mediterranean culture were at the mercy of nature. When strong winds overtook the group in the boat, the disciples panic.

The expectation was that humans were subject to nature and must suffer it. Anyone who had control over nature was extraordinary. At the annunciation, the simple biological facts of conception so familiar to us today were totally unknown by everyone in the Mediterranean world. Instead, a few dominant beliefs were held. Spirits of all kinds affected human life; we see this in the many gospel accounts of demon possession. Mary would have no difficulty in understanding her pregnancy as a result of Spirit intervention.

Also significant in the culture was a resignation to life as something completely beyond human control; this is what may be described as human beings are subject to nature. Mary's response: "let it be done to me according to your will" reflects both a choice made in trust to the God she believed in as well as resignation to God's will. Conception and birth were seen as in the realm of nature which is completely beyond any human control. Human beings are simply subject to it, and certainly not in charge of it.

Human nature was considered in Mediterranean culture to be a mixture of good and evil, a vision that Mary shared, of the desirable and the undesirable. Surely at the human level she must have wondered at the behaviour and words of her son at the finding of the adolescent Jesus in the Temple. Like all other Mediterranean persons, Mary, the mother of Jesus, guided her life by these same values. The results are authentic but at times disappointing for some from a Western culture but it is unfair to the Gospel picture to impose our Western cultural values on a Mediterranean mindset.

Cultural conflict

Mary is repeatedly proposed as a model for Christians to imitate in documents such as *Behold Your Mother*, *Redemptoris Mater*, and *Partners in Ministry*. Here is an extract from John Paul II's *Redemptoris Mater* #46, with a cultural analyst's evaluation in italics:

'Women, by looking at Mary, find in her the secret of living their femininity with dignity and achieving their own true advancement. In the light of Mary, the church sees in the face of women the reflection of beauty which mirrors the loftiest sentiments of which the human heart is capable: the self-offering totality of love [cf. *group preference over individual needs*]; the strength that is capable of bearing the greatest sorrows [cf. *submission to nature; spontaneous response to human experience*]; limitless fidelity and tireless devotion to work [cf. *focus on the present moment, no view of the future*]; the ability to combine penetrating intuition with words of support and encouragement [cf. *intuition + words = submission to nature, no control over life*].

The paragraph captures and expresses the primary values held and exemplified by Mary the Mediterranean maiden, values that should be cherished and reflected in the behaviour of all Mediterranean women. The document proposes the values for all women to imitate: submitting personal desires to the needs and desires of the group, accepting without question or resistance the reversals of life, single-minded devotion to the present; etc.

The question raised by such exhortations and many others is 'how can women from a culture other than a Mediterranean culture imitate these values? How can a culture whose primary values are doing, respect for individualism, and control over nature, relate to the values held and practised by Mary in her cultural world?

"Despite certain pietistic attitudes that sometimes placed Mary on a pedestal wholly above the human condition, women now see her as a person who achieved the wholeness they seek through prayer [cf. *spontaneous response to human experience, someone else is in charge*], human work [cf. *doing or submission to human existence?*], suffering [cf. *submission to human existence; the world as a mixture of good and evil*], and victory over injustice." *Partners in Ministry*.

Two understandings of work

Human work in Mediterranean interpretation would be: work is for women and slaves, certainly not for men for whom leisure is the chief value. The world of Paul and Corinthians is a clear illustration. Women seek wholeness through work in such a society. In mainstream Western society, work would be interpreted as the human value described as 'doing', a woman's ability to be independent, to make a plan, gather the resources, and then strive to fulfill the designated plan. Clearly, two different understandings and two different interpretations!

Why include suffering? It is a nuisance and often unavoidable, for which there are few remedies to alleviate and even remove it. A culture convinced that nature is to be mastered has difficulty imagining or cherishing something that might be called 'redemptive suffering'. The first order for the Western mindset is to master nature and with it suffering. Human effort would be placed on equal footing with prayer in our culture with God being invoked to insure or facilitate the success of the effort.

Summary

To propose Mary as a paradigm of passivity and submission to male authority, a woman valued chiefly for her virginity and motherhood, a woman confined to domestic and family roles, is as unfair to her as presenting her as so uniquely exalted and gifted, because of her privileges of grace, that she is beyond emulation.

Both approaches can reflect devotional representations that run far from that proposed by St. Therese of Liseaux: "*For a sermon on the Blessed Virgin to please me...I must see her real life...They show her to us as un-approachable, but they should present her as imitable, bringing out her virtues, saying that she lived by faith just like ourselves, giving proofs of this from the Gospels.*"

Source

Pilch, J. J. (1990). Mediterranean devotion and wellness spirituality: Bridging and American Cultures. *Biblical Theology Bulletin* 20:2, 70-95.

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