

## **Mary in Culture - Part 6 of 9 - Popular Devotion**

### **Introduction**

Authentic devotion to Mary should at the very least be based on a respectful understanding of her within her native Mediterranean culture and the roles she played within that culture. Often the values held in different cultures are quite opposite. How can authentic Marian devotion be adapted or newly developed in a radically different culture? The question is important given the decreased interest in popular devotions. Vatican II never suppressed popular devotions. Paul VI encouraged them. But both sources encouraged the provision of theological underpinnings and urged that they be coordinated with the Liturgy. Nor should they take place during the liturgical celebration of the Eucharist.

It is possible to uncover the religious dimension that lies at the heart of popular culture, even when its practices are peculiar to one or another social group. This religious piety or spirituality can be gradually purified and deepened in the ongoing process of evangelisation and religious formation. With spiritual maturity believers can draw greater benefit from the very same sources of grace available in the Liturgy.

### **A Personal Experience**

I accompanied the late Fr. Humphrey O'Leary CSSR, to the Redemptorist shrine of Our Lady of Perpetual Help. Waves of people in their thousands visited weekly, on Wednesday nights, clergy and religious, families, the workers, and even street workers, throughout the night. While devotion to the Mother of God brought them there it was the procession in the aisle that brought them up to her Son in the Eucharist as they went up and places their hand reverently on the tabernacle. Also present were priests available for the Sacrament of Reconciliation.

It was a wonderful blending of piety and Sacraments! Authentic popular devotion is spontaneous; holistic (touches all aspects of human experience. It supplements formal liturgical prayer; it combines the sacred and profane; it is rooted in the strong conviction of the need for conversion. These are positive qualities of popular devotion, including devotion to Mary.

### **Cultural Clashes**

Western culture tends towards 'doing', facing challenges, planning. Preference for activity tends sometimes to put prayer in second place. God is called on only in emergencies. If Mary is seen as doing God's will by passive consent then our culture sees God's will is done when human beings do their 100%. The West has spawned individualistic culture, not to be totally condemned, but its excesses are to be avoided. The future is such a concern that people can effectively fail to experience or appreciate the present and are totally confused about the past. Sometimes tradition – and the bearers of it are neglected.

Nature is there to be mastered and shaped and understood rather than viewed with awe as God's handiwork. The experience of God in such a culture is significantly different from that of Mary, the Mediterranean maiden.

## **Wellness Spirituality**

What is shared is a common starting point: the experience of God. How might Mary serve as a model for the world we live in? Change is a central feature of our culture and it definitely characterises popular devotions and spiritualities as well. Individuals are free to change on their own terms and at their own pace. The image of Mary as a disciple of Jesus proposed by Paul VI in 1974 and developed in its biblical dimensions by scholars such as Francis Moloney SDB (*Mary Woman and Mother*) and Bert Buby SM (*Mary of Galilee: Mary in the New Testament*) is one commendable approach. To live as a disciple of Jesus within our own cultural background is as obvious for our world as it was for Mary's.

Images other than discipleship are also possible. Yet no matter what image of Mary is chosen for one's spirituality or popular devotion, it is important to respect the cultural distinctiveness of Mary before attempting to universalize her virtues for worldwide imitation and to resist enculturating her in a given culture so deeply that she is no longer the Mediterranean maiden.

I remember well presenting Mary in the context of a day in the life of a peasant woman of Nazareth, its field work of up to five hours, caring for her own small garden, looking after a few animals, preparing food for the winter, the reality was a ten hour work day. One of the school group attending was a hard working cleaning woman who remarked, "I have always thought of Mary as the lovely lady dressed in blue, with lily white hands. Now I see her life was very like mine, and I feel much closer to her!" My response was to be moved to say, "And I am sure she feels much closer to you, too!"

## **Paul VI**

In his great document on the renewal of devotion to Mary, the pope stated the following: "The Virgin Mary has always been presented to the faithful by the Church as an example to be imitated not precisely in the type of life she led, and much less for the socio-cultural background in which she lived and which today scarcely exists anywhere. She is held up as an example to the faithful for the way in which in her own particular life she fully and responsibly accepted the will of God, because she heard the word of God and acted on it, and because charity and a spirit of service were the driving force of her actions. She is worthy of imitation because she was the first and most perfect of Christ's disciples. All this has a permanent and universal exemplary value." (*Marialis Cultus* #35).

## **Reference**

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

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