

MARY

A New Perspective

Marion Morgan

MUCH HAS BEEN WRITTEN about difficulties with seeing God as 'Father', but there is little available for people who have had difficulty seeing Mary as 'Mother'. Relating to Mary was a major problem for me when I was first exploring the Roman Catholic Church having been an Anglican for 25 years.

My own mother developed multiple sclerosis when I was 14, and my father and I cared for her until I finally left home when I was 25, in 1967. This caused me many problems. Although my caring side developed, the frustrations of being 'on call', of trying to fix a social life in the remaining time, of feeling guilty when I resented my lifestyle or when I got impatient with her, all took its toll on me. I was also holding down a full-time job. A 'mother' came to mean to me someone who always wanted something done whenever I went near her; who prevented me from doing the things I wanted to do; who limited my freedom. This was not intentional on her part: she tried to encourage me to go out and about, but I was always rather stressed when I did so, and simply did not have the energy to enjoy things much.

Looking after her perforce made me more 'domestic' than I wished. I always felt she disapproved of me because my ambitions were not necessarily to run a tidy and efficient home and be a good mother myself. Her life had become rather narrow, and anything out of the ordinary worried her. These values were somewhat reinforced by the evangelical church the family attended. All in all, when I had finally left home (for my own health reasons) and come to Bristol to explore life and other ways of living it, the last thing I wanted on the horizon was another mother. It may have been what I needed, but it was most certainly not what I wanted.

After two years of exploring my faith, I came to the Roman Catholic Church for instruction. Relating to Mary was a problem, both emotionally

and also theologically. The theological problems gradually resolved as I 'grew' in the Church—I was received in October 1969. The emotional problems remained.

At the beginning, it came to me that I could relate to Mary as an older sister. Older sisters are great, in my mind. They have more experience, and so can give advice and perspective on things, and stand up for you on occasions. But they have no authority over you, so you can disagree or argue with them without major repercussions. They can take the pressure off you, and you can ask them for help. So that is how I started to relate to Mary.

One other problem was that I felt slightly jealous of Mary's closeness to Jesus. Coming from a background where one's own personal relationship with Jesus was heavily emphasized, I did not really want her 'intruding' on 'my' relationship with him. Why did I have to go through her to relate to him? It felt a bit like having a mother-in-law who wouldn't let go!

I have found shades of this same problem with other enquirers coming into the Roman Catholic Church. If they have a Christian background, they want to pray to God the Father or the Holy Spirit or Jesus in their available prayer time, and not necessarily to Mary. I find it is good to remember that it took time for the devotion to Mary to grow within the early Church. I certainly found that it took time to grow in my own

developing life within the Roman Catholic Church.

But over the years it has grown, although not in a 'straight line' sort of development. Almost from the beginning of any instruction in the faith, you are introduced to simple prayers to Mary. When you start attending Mass, the devotions of people at the Lady Altar are hard to miss, and there are announcements of feast days or memorials, pilgrimages and days of prayer, apart from the weekly prayer in the bidding prayers. Mary is quite obviously part of the package.



The strange thing that I found is that it is very possible to enjoy and appreciate these devotions and references without actually agreeing to them intellectually. Quite early on in my journey, the church I was attending took part in a public procession through the city centre, praying the rosary. Although I did not take part, I saw that it was obviously meaningful to those who did participate. I never did discover what the general public thought of it.

I am particularly interested in the ways in which Mary is presented to outsiders as I now lead the parish RCIA group.¹ I find that some enquirers simply accept Mary with all her comforting accoutrements (statues, processions, hymns and so on) while others, as I did myself, find great difficulty in justifying the attention we pay to her and the doctrines surrounding her. Of course, many Catholics have the same difficulties!

Theological Problems

Problems with Mary can be exacerbated by the apparently ‘fanciful’ doctrines that now refer to her. Though they are consistent with scripture, I defy anyone actually to prove them from scripture on the evidence available. I say ‘fanciful’ because pictures of Mary being literally crowned in heaven are obviously drawn from human imagery; this by no means invalidates them, but it can create more problems for the sceptic.

In his book *Models of the Church*, Avery Dulles says:

I draw the conclusion that a balanced theology of the Church must find a way of incorporating the major affirmations of each basic ecclesiological type. Each of the models calls attention to certain aspects of the Church that are less clearly brought out by other models.

And a little further on he adds:

In order to do justice to the various aspects of the Church, as a complex reality, we must work simultaneously with different models. By a kind of mental juggling act, we have to keep several models in the air at once.²

I find these remarks helpful in our consideration of Mary. Avery Dulles pays attention to five main models of the Church: the Church as Institution; the Church as Mystical Communion; the Church as Sacrament; the Church as Herald; and the Church as Servant. The easiest model to use,

¹ Rite of Christian Initiation of Adults.

² Avery Dulles, *Models of the Church* (New York: Random House, 2002), 2.



and hence to provide a context for Mary, is the model of the Church as the gathered People of God. I see this as a sort of prelude to experiencing the Church as Mystical Communion.

It is firmly stated in scripture that Mary joined with the disciples in prayer after the resurrection and was present with them when the Spirit came in visible form at pentecost. This is an essential 'base position' for any further reflection, particularly when speaking with people from an Evangelical tradition. Mary is also present on other occasions recorded in the Gospels. Most importantly, Mary is the actual mother of Jesus, which is important for the later model of Church as Mystical Body.

Above all, then, Mary is a member of the Church. Her other titles and honours all stem from this. As a member of the Church, she also is missionary and a servant—no one can dispute this! She is the one who first presented Jesus to the people of the world. She is the original bringer of Christ—she was his mother.

As a member of the Church, she is also a prime example of a Christian.

What is said of her should also, in a lesser way, be applicable to us. She was born holy. The seeds of holiness are planted in us at baptism and, by the end of our earthly life, we should have grown somewhat in holiness. She is in heaven, body and soul. We believe that, in the fullness of time, we also shall be in heaven, body and soul. We also will be rewarded and honoured appropriately for our earthly activities and struggles.

Maybe we can also come to share in her mothering role in the Church, encouraging and supporting and nurturing others, and being cared for in return. This in no way diminishes Mary's unique role in the Church, just as sharing in Jesus' work in the Church in all its aspects does not diminish his unique work of salvation. It may even be that if more of us saw ourselves

as ‘mothers’ (or even ‘grandmothers’) in the Church, there would be less rivalry and antagonism among its somewhat fractious children.

Ultimately we also share with Mary in the contemplation of the wonders of the Trinity. We are all created beings. All our souls join in united voice in declaring: ‘Our souls magnify the Lord; our spirits rejoice in God our Saviour’.

The institutional model of the Church at first sight brings few insights into the person and roles of Mary. Its main role seems to be in affirming and validating the various doctrines concerning her. It also plays a role in sanctioning and regulating devotional practices and investigating and assessing the reports of her various ‘appearances’. Of course she is present in an unseen way, as she is present in the whole Church.

When we consider the Church as the Mystical Body of Christ, then it follows that Mary, as the natural mother of Jesus, takes on, in a fairly easy logical progression, the role of spiritual mother of the Church. This is reinforced by the dialogue in John’s Gospel between Jesus and John: ‘Here is your son Here is your mother.’ (John 19:25–28) The problem I find is that, although this makes a certain sense, the true depth of meaning can only grow in a person as he or she receives the sacraments within the Church, and this takes time. As I have said, the Church itself took centuries before it was able to define the main doctrines that we now almost take for granted. The Church as Sacrament and the Church as Mystical Body are, I think, concepts that we grow into as we grow within the Church.

A Growing Relationship

Over the many years since I was received into the Church, my relationship with Mary slowly developed. In time, I began to know her also as ‘mother’. I could pray at the Lady Altar in churches and find comfort. I had a much deeper understanding of her role in the life of the Church. Whatever my personal opinion of some devotions and pictures, I have no doubt regarding the reality of the experiences of countless people who encounter Mary through these very images and practices.

Having said that, I still felt that, deep inside, there were parts of me that Mary did not appear to reach: the more masculine side of me, the side that wants to explore, the analytical part of my brain. The fulfilment and satisfaction I experience when I have organized something at work successfully, or when I feel truly alive after a good discussion: it is then that I do not want to implore for help in struggling through this ‘vale of

tears'. Mary shares out sorrows, yes—but how does she share in our joys and successes? How do we *really* think about her?

Doctrines regarding Mary's great sanctity and purity, not to mention her immaculate conception, are not always the most helpful or even the most meaningful ways of thinking about her. Questions that come to mind are: what was she really *like*? Was she musical? Did she laugh? How did she relate to the other villagers? She was a human *person*—not just a function. What was she like in her 'off-duty' moments? She may be universal mother but she can never be *only* a mother. She is herself, who is also a mother.

Our house has a small garden which backs on to the main railway line between London and Penzance. On selected days in the summer, steam trains come puffing up the rail taking people on excursions to the Devon coast. As they pick up speed it is hard not to get excited with them. One morning I had a lovely image of Mary sitting on the engine with hands in the air calling *Whoopee!* It stayed with me for the rest of the day!

A Female Role Model

I now share a house with, and care for, an autistic adult. He came to the parish some forty years ago. As his parents grew older he related more and more to me, and eventually, with his parents' help and consent, we moved into where we are both now living. So, once again, I am a carer, and once again I am restricted by the limitations of the situation. This time I do not mind. I have respite care for him when I need it, as well as on a regular basis, and can still pursue my own interests when I wish. But making a residential retreat is difficult, as I would have to take him (and our dog) with me: without going into details, it just does not work. So what we do is to rent a cottage somewhere and all go there. I take a book and the Bible and do specific meditations morning and evening, making notes as I go. And it does work! The Lord adapts to the circumstances, and I always come back refreshed and renewed.

Last year, I thought I would start by answering a question I had read in the April 2015 issue of *The Way*, in the article on 'Ignatian Spirituality and Christian Feminism' by Maria McCoy: have you a female role model? Pondering this proved very fruitful. Again, I realised that thinking about Mary as mother in the home at Nazareth, or as mother enabling us to be and grow into the person we were meant to be, was helpful, but still did not go far enough.

Then, one morning, I was meditating on Jesus' reply to the woman at the well, that he would give us living water that would spring up inside us.

And I thought of many people, all with this living water springing up, and how it would water and soften the earth around them. Then I asked where the water came from, and I saw deep, dark caves with a river flowing through them. And I could bathe in the river and immerse myself in it, with joy. And I looked round and there was Mary, doing the same thing. She was dark, with long dark hair, and she was laughing and shaking the drops out of her hair and bathing in the river and the fountains, and in the deep river pools. She was simply being herself, having stripped herself of all her roles: separate from me, but in union, in deep companionship. No doubt there were other women there as well: it was a women-only bathing place. I did not pursue the image further.

Of course Mary simultaneously retains all her roles, privileges and titles. But this, to me, is the 'core' of Mary—as it is the core of all of us. She is a child of the Father, created in the Trinity, living in the Spirit, eternal spouse of the Holy Spirit, as well as being Mother of God. She joins us in contemplation of God and in enjoyment of all that God has created. But I now at last have a deep reference point for my relationship with Mary. Without denying any of her other attributes and roles, she is deeply, thoroughly human and, as such, kin to all of us.

Marion Morgan OCV worked for the civil service in London's East End before moving to Bristol and joining the Roman Catholic Church in 1969. She studied theology at Bristol University and Heythrop College before working for many years in ecumenism at local and national levels. After some years as a freelance feature writer, she is now retired and a member of the Order of Consecrated Virgins. Among other activities, she leads the RCIA group in the parish of St Mary-on-the-Quay, Bristol.