

Marian Dimension of the Church

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In today's society, and especially in the many apostolic faith communities in which Marianists participate, we need to reclaim what sort of holiness and union Mary points us toward. It seems that from a reading of the scripture passages that speak of Mary we can make some tentative statements about the Marian character of holiness.

Holiness/Wholeness is founded on trust, not fear. This is the first statement which comes from the infancy narrative of St. Luke. Luke contrasts the response of Zachariah with that of Mary. Both are troubled, both are given incredible news concerning the birth of a son, and both question the angel regarding the announcement. The difference between the two accounts is that in Zachariah's case we read that he was struck dumb for the duration of the pregnancy, while Mary's questioning found favor with God. What is going on here? One interpretation is that Luke is not only trying to say something about Mary's response but also about the God to whom she responds.

Can Luke be suggesting in part that fear binds the soul and prevents us from achieving the true holiness to which we are called? Luke will return to this theme later in the Gospel. In curing the daughter of Jarius, Jesus says, "Fear is useless; what is needed is trust" (Lk 8:50).

Psychologically, we know that unresolved core fears can drive addictions to alcohol, drugs, work, sex, etc. A fear of abandonment, for instance, can enslave a person to continually chase the approval of authority figures. Ironically, all God asks of us is to trust. But this is easier said than done.

Mary, of course, was free of becoming enslaved by her fears. Being human, she had fears. Being holy, she could let go of them so she could be of service to others. For us, living in community, we often have fears of rejection, conflict, abandonment, and

others. Giving into these fears can mean that we create cozy communities where we get our needs met, but where we also avoid the pain of a cruel and harsh world. As a symbol of holiness, Mary encourages us to move beyond fear to trust.

Holiness is built on dialogue, with God, and with others. Luke begins and ends his Gospel with dialogue. Gabriel and Mary engage in a fruitful exchange that leads to the Word becoming present in the world. At the end of the Gospel the disciples on the way to Emmaus engage a stranger in conversation and, at the end of the dialogue, are transformed through “the breaking of the bread.” Because God is love and not to be feared, we experience a freedom to listen deeply to our own stories, our own mystery. Mary shows us the way to ask the question, to listen, to respond deeply, and to enter into the deepest parts of our own identity as children of God. This way of dialoguing with God and the world is profoundly Eucharistic because it is at once honest and truth-seeking. It has the potential of removing our masks and allowing us an insight into the hidden parts of our own hearts, for we are called to dive deeper into the waters of life.

We are reminded of St. Augustine's exhortation to us as when receiving the Eucharist: “To that which you are, you respond ‘Amen’ (‘yes, it is true’), and by responding to it, you assent to it. For you hear the words, ‘The Body of Christ’ and respond ‘Amen.’ Be then a member of the Body of Christ that your *Amen* may be true.” (St. Augustine, Sermon 272). Through dialogue with the angel, Mary gave assent to her own mystery being made present: that she would bear the Body of Christ in her womb, and was at the same time a member of the Body.

To evangelize is to listen deeply to another and to invite them into a deeper, holy reality. One of the worst forms of violence we can perpetuate on another is to ignore and neglect him/her. Studies indicate that the most dysfunctional families are those that are neglectful and that fail to meet even basic needs. Perhaps the deepest form of injustice resides in the nonrecognition of the rights of another: the right to access to the material, psychological, and spiritual resources necessary to live a humane existence.

Is it possible that Mary's visiting her cousin Elizabeth brought them both to a deeper appreciation of their own identity and calling? Mary is an example to the Church

of evangelical hospitality, a deep and sincere caring for the other that reaches out with respect in hope that the other perceives the deeper mystery of the Word that already resides within him/her.

Today, denial is the response of choice by our culture to the many physical and psychic casualties of failed institutions. In our faith communities we need to welcome another not with denial, but with evangelical hospitality. This means that we listen to the person's story as well as share the story of liberation that comes to us through the Gospels and our present-day experience of the Spirit working in our lives. In a sense we are called to be Mary greeting Elizabeth, recognizing in the encounter the presence of God's Word. Evangelical hospitality is a recognition that we build the world up through our commitments to others and to the work of justice in our society. Mary made her choice freely; there is always a choice present for communities, for we sometimes choose to opt into the culture of denial. When we do this, we close ourselves off from the world, from those who are different, and we begin to tear down the world by this subtle form of betrayal of our commitments.

To be Holy is to Inquire. Mary's first words to the angel were, "How can this be...?" To be curious, to inquire, takes us into strange territory and pulls us away from our familiar haunts. Without curiosity, Moses would have never come to know that "God is one." Inquiry is the first step of one seeking membership in the Church. The inquirer not only seeks information about the Church but also about how God is the One in whom the heart finds its rest. Inquiry often leads a person to face his/her limits, physical, intellectual, and spiritual. By facing our limitations and the boundary of death, we naturally cry out to know more, to peer beyond the veil, to find certainty in an uncertain world. The impulse to inquire, as Augustine hinted at, is an impulse of grace that leads us to God. And Mary can serve as a model of transformative inquiry.

Inquiry is not limited just to faith issues, however. We have traditionally called Mary the "mother of the faithful." Perhaps one day we will call Mary the "mother of scientific inquiry." In the Gospel of Matthew, the first visitors to Mary were the Magi, astronomers/astrologers who scanned the heavens seeking not only knowledge of the physical world but also knowledge of the spiritual as well. Mary is one who would

probably agree with the Thomistic principle that “faith does not contradict knowledge.” Today’s scientist often seeks to achieve an integrative vision and balance concerning how his or her field is connected and integrated with other scientific disciplines. The scientist is often more impressed by what is not known than by what is known. Modern creation accounts given to us by cosmologists and astronomers lead the person to a state of wonder and awe, where often the question is asked, “How did a world as strange as ours come into existence in the first place?” This type of wonder and awe, flowing from the simple question of “How can this be...?” seems to be a particular doorway to the sacred.

Inquiry leads us to the cry for justice and a desire for deeper holiness. Even when a person is grasped by faith, days of inquiry are far from over. Mary’s questioning—“How can this be?”—can be uttered as a cry against injustice and oppression that so often defines the power structures of our world. The Marian dimension of the Church implies that we go beyond a “me and Jesus” mentality to a mentality that places the community of Church, nations, and humanity at center stage. Mary asks, “How can it be that I am to be the mother of the savior.” We ask, “How can it be accomplished that we are called to bring Christ to people who often do not have access to even the most basic of resources?” In asking questions like this, we are brought face-to-face with the necessity of making a commitment to social justice and transformation. We begin to realize that social transformation appears as impossible a task as a virgin giving birth to a son. But we realize further that as Mary placed her trust in the one God who accomplishes all things, we, too, are called to place our trust in God and then act with zeal for the desired transformation.

To be holy is to have your heart pierced by the sufferings of the world. In Luke 3:35 the prophet Simeon tells Mary: “And you yourself a sword will pierce so that the thoughts of many hearts may be revealed.” In twentieth-century language we can state Mary did not deny her own sufferings and pain, and the way she suffered linked her to the suffering of others. To be truly holy is to have one’s eyes open to the sufferings of others. In the Rich Man and Lazarus, Jesus makes it abundantly clear that the rich man was oblivious to the sufferings of Lazarus. To be blind to the sufferings of others is to be

in a state of denial, but even more, to be un-holy means that a person makes a choice to deny, to not look, to not see.

The image of Mary at the foot of the cross is a clear example of her ability to see and not deny the reality facing her. To look upon Jesus who was pierced must have been a most difficult experience. To touch and clean his wounds must have caused Mary even greater pain.

It is curious to note that Thomas the doubter became convinced of the Risen Christ only after placing his hands in the wounds of Jesus (Jn 20:27). Jesus had been transformed by the Resurrection, but not his wounds! It is in the seeing the wounds of others that we come to recognize Christ and come to lead people to Christ. To minister to the suffering, the “walking wounded” of our times, those who have AIDS, those who have been abused or tortured, is to find Christ. And Mary would have us open our eyes to the suffering of the world, not to glory in it, but so that it might be healed and transformed through the Spirit working through us.