

STRANGE HEAVEN: THE VIRGIN MARY AS
WOMAN, MOTHER, DISCIPLE, AND
ADVOCATE

by Jon M. Sweeney
Paraclete Press, 2006

Introduction

IMAGINING MARY

We know almost nothing about her for certain. There are no surviving documents that were written in her own hand. No letters, no diaries. There are relics, of course—thousands upon thousands of relics. One sparsely written inventory prepared in 1346 for a French chapel includes:

*Item, the hairs of St. Mary; item, from her robe; item, a shallow ivory box without any ornament save only a knob of copper, which box contains some of the flower which the Blessed Virgin held before her Son, and of the window through which the Archangel Gabriel entered when he saluted her.*¹

We also don't have any teachings of Mary. Erasmus once complained—"We kiss the shoes of the saints and their dirty handkerchiefs and we leave their books, their most holy and efficacious relics, neglected"—but in Mary's case, there are no books, either.

There are also no images of her that can be dated to first-century Palestine. We have her likeness, however, which is supposed to have been handed down generation to generation since St. Luke first painted it. The tradition of Luke as Mary's first iconographer probably began because it is mostly his Gospel that preserves what we *do* know about her from the New Testament. Medieval Christians believed that Luke actually interviewed Mary for the writing of his text. As he explains at the outset of his Gospel: "[These events] were handed on



¹ G. G. Coulton, *Life in the Middle Ages, Vol. IV*, (New York: Macmillan, 1935), 169. Translated quotes from Coulton's book have been occasionally updated according to modern spelling and usage.

to us by those who from the beginning were eyewitnesses and servants of the world.” For whatever reason, Luke seems to have understood Mary and her perspective. This is likely why there are many icons depicting Luke painting an icon of the Virgin. Although not exact physical images of Mary, Catholic and Orthodox Christians usually believe that these icons present the spirit of Mary, and offer a window to her in heaven.

We also don't have eyewitness accounts of her life. Mary would have been in her mid to late forties at the time of Jesus' passion, resurrection, and ascension. Contrary to the legend of Luke's friendship with her, most scholars agree that the first of the New Testament Gospels was written no sooner than twenty-five years after those events had occurred; Mary would most likely have been gone by then.

We never seem to imagine that Mary could have constructed her own image. Surely it is possible that, like many saints that came after her, Mary deliberately created and nurtured the images of her sanctity that have been handed down to us since the days of the early church. Instead, we usually presume that Mary's image was built for her—an idealized portrait that then says far more about us than it does about her.

The dominant image of Mary that we inherited from the ancient church is of her as a refined, graceful, pensive young woman who was nevertheless full of wisdom. She was also seen as quickly subservient to the will of a masculine God, his angels, and the husband who was appointed to care for her. In the eyes of the ancients, Mary became what feminist scholars would today call the first of the *domesticated goddesses*—which is not intended to be a compliment to her, or to us. An imposed super-femininity emasculated her strength and wisdom.

These qualities of the idealized Virgin became spiritual ideals for centuries of Christian women and men. One example of how they seeped completely into our culture comes from the stories of Protestant author Harriet Beecher Stowe; she wrote about Mary in two of her novels that came after *Uncle Tom's Cabin*. To imbibe the lesson of Mary, according to Stowe, is to discover “women's eternal power of self-sacrifice to what she deems noblest.” In *Agnes of Sorrento* (1862), Stowe describes her Virgin Mary-character, Agnes, using language that could be taken directly from a medieval chronicle of the Virgin:

She might have been fifteen or thereabouts, but was so small of stature that she seemed yet a child. Her black hair was parted in a white unbroken seam down to the high forehead, whose serious arch, like that of a cathedral door, spoke of thought and prayer. Beneath the shadows of this brow lay brown, translucent eyes, into whose thoughtful depths one might look as pilgrims gaze into the waters of some saintly well, cool and pure down to the unblemished sand at the bottom. The small lips had a gentle compression, which indicated a repressed strength of feeling; while the straight line of the nose, and the flexible, delicate nostril, were perfect as in those sculptured fragments of the antique which the soil of Italy so often gives forth to the day from the sepulchers of the past. The habitual pose of the head and face had the shy uplooking grace of a violet; and yet there was a grave tranquility of expression, which gave a peculiar degree of character to the whole figure.

At the moment at which we have called your attention, the fair head is bent, the long eyelashes lie softly down on the pale, smooth cheek; for the Ave Maria bell is sounding from the Cathedral of Sorrento, and the child is busy with her beads.

“The child is busy with her beads.” In other words, she is praying the rosary, entreating Mary, the intercessor to Christ. The Virgin Mary is, in fact, often pictured in religious art holding rosary beads, as the originator of the practice now devoted to her, and the messages of Mary in many of her apparitions have been to pray the rosary, or, at least, to pray.

One sentence from Luke’s Gospel says volumes about this young woman: “Mary kept all these things, pondering them in her heart” (2:19 RSV). Such a statement does not mean that she simply thought about heavenly things; it says something, too, about her wisdom. She was not a quick or careless thinker. Bernardino of Siena takes this notion a bit deeper; in a famous sermon delivered on August 15, 1427, Bernardino spent two hours relaying to his audience what he called the twelve qualities of the Virgin Mary. Number one was her intelligence. Despite our inherited images of Mary as a servant of a masculine God, hers was not a credulous faith.

Thanks to scholarly developments, in recent decades we have come closer than ever to knowing the historical person, Mary of Nazareth. Archaeology, sociology, and historical investigations into first-century Judaism and the role of women have helped us to paint a picture of who she might have been. There is Mary (or Miriam, as she would have been called in Hebrew) the Mother of God, the object of devotion and the subject of numerous minutiae of Roman Catholic theology, but there is also Mary, the simple woman who became the mother of Jesus. By all of the earliest accounts, she was unmarried and pregnant, poor and insignificant, a woman living in an occupied country. One recent biographical description of her goes like this:

She is thirteen. Short and wiry, with dark olive skin. The trace of a mustache on her upper lip, soft black down on her arms and legs. The muscles are hard knots in her arms, solid lines in her calves. Her hair is almost black, and has been folded into a single braid down her back for as long as she can remember. The weight of it raises her chin and makes her walk tall, as she has learned to do when carrying jars of water or bundles of kindling on her head. You don't bend under the burden. You root into the ground and grow out of it, reaching up and becoming taller. The greater the weight, the taller you become: the peasant woman's secret of making the burden light.²

But most of what fascinates us about Mary is not reducible to historical fact or theory. It is her *myth* that draws us: Her power to fascinate us intellectually is surpassed only by her ability to inspire devotion.

Dietrich Bonhoeffer once wrote to a friend, "I must learn more about the Middle Ages. We need them." Bonhoeffer understood that the medieval period was a time when religion, culture, and spirituality blended almost seamlessly. God seemed to most people, then, to be alive and active in the world. People of all backgrounds and economic classes shared a sacramental view of the world around them: The creation was alive with spiritual meaning; God was among them, and there was no aspect of life that stood outside of divine influence and spirit. Also, humans were God's special project, formed by hand out of earth at the beginning of time. Like a potter, God built humans carefully, and the notion of a perfect, idealized creation still seemed

² Lesley Hazelton, *Mary: A Flesh-and-Blood Biography of the Virgin Mother* (New York: Bloomsbury, 2004), 1.

possible. In the chapters that follow, we will often turn to the imagination of the Middle Ages in order to discover the traditions and beliefs that have surrounded the Virgin for ages. The feelings and actions of the devout toward Mary today are a mirror image of those of our medieval ancestors. Despite enlightenments, science, and other notions of progress, so many of us still bow our heads, finger our beads, and listen to her for comfort and assurance.

What is it that motivates twenty-first century Christians, modern in every other respect, to bow like medieval pilgrims before statues of the Virgin Mary in churches around the world, praying earnestly for her intercession before God? Also, why would an icon of the Virgin be one of a pope's most cherished possessions, hanging above his private desk in the Vatican, "watching over my daily service to the church," as John Paul II once explained during a homily? That icon is called the Madonna of Kazan, named for a city about five hundred miles east of Moscow in the Republic of Tatarstan. When a papal delegation traveled to the former Soviet Union in order to return it to the patriarchs of the Russian Orthodox Church at the end of August 2004, why did that gesture become one of the most important signs of improving ecumenical relations between the two churches in recent memory?³

At the same time, why does Mary also sometimes spark violent reactions against religion, or her, or God? Images of Mary can lead to sudden feelings and emotions from people, even those who may not be religious. Many times I have seen tears on the faces of people in the halls of art galleries, where most observations of religious art are so cool and detached. In other instances, an image of Mary can cause the mentally unstable to come unhinged, as, for instance, when in 1972 a man in New York City climbed onto Michelangelo's *Pietà* (which was on loan from the Vatican) and began pounding Mary with a hammer. He hit her in the face, breaking part of an eye, and he severed a finger on the famous left hand of the Virgin—the hand that is tilted up as if to say, "I accept what must happen to my son." Similarly, *The Virgin and the Child with Saint Anne and Saint John the Baptist* appears to be the most vandalized painting in London's National Gallery, having twice been damaged. In 1962 it was attacked with a bottle of ink, and in 1987, with a sawed-off shotgun.

She has had the power to rouse armies and to rally great causes. Images of Mary were once carried proudly before Russian, Greek,

³ Pope John Paul II quote taken from John L. Allen's weekly column, "The Word from Rome," *National Catholic Reporter*, August 27, 2004.

Spanish, and Italian armies as they marched into battle. The ancient Israelites followed the Ark of the Covenant and the French and the Ethiopians the cross, but many other armies enlisted the Virgin Mary as some sort of divine protection from worldly harm. The Spanish conquistadors, in fact, frequently employed images of Mary on this continent in their battles for Mexico, and her likeness became synonymous with dominance and victory. How could the Blessed Virgin's image be honored as *La Conquistadora*?

Mary has become a symbol of national identity. She is the patron saint of Cuba, revered as the Virgin of Charity. She is the patron of Poland, in the enigmatic figure of the Black Madonna, Our Lady of Czestochowa. She has even rallied labor unions. Why did Cesar Chavez feel that devotion to the Virgin was essential to the public fight for justice for California's Mexican farm workers?

Over the centuries, Catholic and Orthodox Christians have imagined roles such as these for Mary out of their expansive and sacramental ways of viewing the world around them. In the sixteenth century, Protestants moved swiftly in their attempt to cut off this imagining, but they didn't account for the more subtle means by which the ancient ways of knowing may stick with us. It is natural, now, to want to turn back and look at what we have left behind.

The Catholic imagination is powerful, in ways that the Protestant imagination cannot match. When the Protestant imagination focuses on the gulf that separates us from God, the Catholic imagination sees the sacramental nature of all that is around us. While Protestant spirituality focuses on the Word of God (preaching it, hearing it, applying it) in order to repair the separation that divides us from God, Catholic spirituality focuses on finding, lifting, and releasing the Spirit of God that is sometimes hidden or latent in the world around us.

Catholic priest and novelist Andrew Greeley explains:

Catholics live in an enchanted world, a world of statues and holy water, stained glass and votive candles, saints and religious medals, rosary beads and holy pictures. But these Catholic paraphernalia are mere hints of a deeper and more pervasive religious sensibility which inclines Catholics to see the Holy lurking in creation. As Catholics, we find our houses and our world haunted by a sense that the objects,

*events, and person of daily life are revelations of grace.*⁴

Archetypes of our ancient, religious imagination—inherited from generations of our ancestors—are always with us, bubbling beneath the surface of our conscious selves. The motherhood of God is one of these archetypes, an idea that is common in many religious traditions, as is sainthood, or the possible culmination of the divine and the earthly within us. Both of these archetypes are central to understanding why images and legends of the Virgin Mary, if not dogma about her, still draw us today. In other words, we don't always "decide" to turn our attention to Mary. It may even be somehow hard-wired into us. As Rowan Williams, the archbishop of Canterbury, recently said, Mary "stands for the making strange of what is familiar and the homeliness of what is strange."⁵

The central act of Mary's life was one in which she was also acted upon by God. Did she have the option to say no? We'll never know for sure. But she didn't say no, and her womb became a "strange heaven," in the words of poet John Donne. This description perhaps best summarizes the feeling that many people, all of us onlookers, have toward Mary's life and vocation. It was strange indeed.

Strange Heaven: The Virgin Mary as Woman, Mother, Disciple, and Advocate

By Jon M. Sweeney

©2006 by Jon M. Sweeney

Used by permission of Paraclete Press

www.paracletepress.com

⁴ Andrew Greeley, *The Catholic Imagination* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2001), 1.

⁵ Rowan Williams, *Ponder These Things: Praying with Icons of the Virgin*, (Brewster, MA: Paraclete Press, 2006), xv.