

Truly Our Sister

A THEOLOGY OF MARY
IN THE COMMUNION OF SAINTS

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2003

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*Dedicated to
all the women of the world
who struggle for the flourishing
of their own human dignity*



Mary is "truly our sister, who as a poor and humble
woman fully shared our lot."

—Pope Paul VI

"For poor women Mary is not a heavenly creature but
shares their lives as a comrade and sister in struggle."

—*Marta Pilar Aquino, Mexico*

Mary is our "sister: a woman in solidarity with other
women and the oppressed."

—*Chung Hyun Kyung, Korea*

"It is the Mary of the Gospels, on whose lips is placed the
Magnificat, who is seen as a colleague by women around
the world who are rediscovering that they have a mission
in society and church. . . . [Her] face is no longer only
that of Our Lady, glorious Queen of Heaven, but also
and primarily an elder sister and traveling companion."

—*Ivone Gebara and Marta Clara Bingenier, Brazil*

"Perhaps for our time her best title is not 'mother,' but
'sister in faith,' not one who directs or defines our way,
but one who reminds us of the resources we carry with
us as we go."

—*Patricia Noone, United States*

Mary has already faced down danger from patriarchal virginity laws, but now her life is once again at risk from the brutal power of the state. The vulnerable child being hunted is never alone but is always in the company of his mother, surrounded, the text implies, by her fierce care, which exposes her to the same peril. Jesus here is indeed "Miriam's child."⁹¹ Repeated allusions to her presence, furthermore, keep punctuating the story with a female center of interest which serves to decenter the exercise of male military and political power that governs this narrative. Her character once again opens a fissure in the symbolic universe of patriarchy. "The infant Jesus is located throughout in the presence of the woman Mary, designated in the text as 'his mother' but evocative of those women whose anomalous stories challenge patriarchal family structures."⁹² Connected with the genealogy, the continuously named presence of Mary in this scene evokes the power and presence of women in Israel's history and the birth of its Messiah. Empowering hearers of this gospel who struggle for women's full participation in the Christian mission, this interpretation allows those threatened by patriarchal violence to themselves constitute an internal counterthreat to the status quo.

Neither Mary nor the Bethlehem mothers speak aloud or otherwise react to the slaughter of the children. The voice of Rachel weeping resounds in this silence. Long a symbolic figure of the suffering mother, more specifically of the nation mourning its lost peoples, even more precisely of Jewish mothers, whose children were murdered on a mass scale, this ancestral figure enters the story to send up their lament to God. They bond together as she articulates their grief, allowing their outrage to cry to heaven. Her tears and loud lamentation rip still another fissure in this well-ordered text. "It is the raised voice of Rachel that pierces the male world of power, of slaughter, and of divine favor,"⁹³ rejecting even the divine plan that would rescue one special child but ignore the rest. Her tears gush forth as resistance to such brutality, her shouts as a challenge to this violent way of running the world. Subverting the patriarchal pattern, this "female image of the compassionate, inconsolable mother provides a counterpoint to the extreme violence of the holocaust of the male children at the hand of the male ruler, Herod."⁹⁴ Since the later verses of this Rachel poem in Jeremiah depict divine compassion in female imagery as the love of a mother for the child of her womb, Rachel also points to the motherly God who weeps inconsolably in protest with those who are bereaved (Jer. 31:20).⁹⁵

One day the authority of the imperial state will get Mary's son too. His close, heart-in-the-mouth brush with death in infancy will turn all too real in his thirties, and his mother's lament will take a newly sharp, personal turn. The good news of the gospel is that the advent of God focused in Jesus, who is descended not only from Abraham and David but also from the defiantly lamenting Rachel and the threatened, fleeing, defiantly surviving Mary, compassionately overcomes the worst outrage. This is the Christian hope. But given the river of deaths of millions of children due to military and domestic assault and the institutional violence of poverty, "Rachel still weeps in every country of the world."⁹⁶ Borrowing phrases from Mary's Magnificat, one contemporary poet imagines her resonating with her grieving ancestor, saying:

Wail, mourn aloud, sister Rachel . . .

Unleash grief's force, sister Rachel, to change what made you grieve . . .

Unleash grief's force, sister Rachel, the mighty to bring down, the wealthy to chase out, the hungry to fill up . . .

Of your child you are deprived; let no one steal your rage.⁹⁷

ANNUNCIATION: CALL OF THE PROPHET (LUKE 1:26-38)

As we begin to examine the tesserae painted by Luke, one color runs through them all. Mary is a disciple, not in the historical sense that she accompanied Jesus during his ministry, but in the existential sense that she heard the word of God and acted upon it. This view comes to the fore in an exchange unique to this gospel. Moved by Jesus' preaching, an admiring woman in the crowd raised her voice to cry, "Blessed is the womb that bore you and the breasts that you sucked!" This was a typical Mediterranean expression that praised a mother for the fine qualities of her son. In reply Jesus emphasized qualities of spirit, saying, "Blessed rather are those who hear the word of God and keep it!" (Luke 11:27-28). Some few interpreters think that with the word "rather" Jesus set up a contrast between true believers and his mother. This explanation does not hold up, however, in view of the positive way Luke presents Mary in all other scenes of his gospel. Instead, the intensifier "rather" means yes, what you said is true as far as it goes, but there is more to be said.⁹⁸ In effect, Jesus' beatitude echoes that of Elizabeth, who early on had saluted the young woman pregnant

with the Messiah with the words, "Blessed is she who believed . . ." (Luke 1:45). In Luke's theology the faith that marks a genuine disciple consists in hearing and acting upon God's word. The next five mosaic stones, taken from his work, present Mary as just such an exemplary disciple in ever varying scenarios.

The annunciation scene, which appears after the announcement of the birth of John the Baptist, depicts Mary with a mood of celebration as a hearer and doer of God's word. The angel Gabriel was sent from God to a young, unlettered woman in Nazareth, a poor village in the oppressed peasant region of Galilee. The girl is betrothed to a man named Joseph, but in accord with Jewish marriage customs has not yet moved into his house to share life together. The heavenly messenger announces God's desire that Mary bear a child who will be great, the Messiah, the holy Son of God. Assured that the Spirit will empower and protect her, she gives her free consent, casting her lot with the great work of redemption in the belief that nothing is impossible with God.

The overarching purpose of this story, as with Matthew's opening narrative, is to disclose to Luke's readers at the outset the truth about Jesus' messianic identity. Using christological titles and language developed by the church after the resurrection, the scene vividly dramatizes the theological point that Jesus did not just become the Son of God after his death (Paul) or even at his baptism (Mark) but is the Son of God from his very conception in this world. At the same time, by making Mary the central character, Luke's text invites reflection on her faith and action in her own right. Indeed, throughout centuries of translation and reflection, no other text has had more influence on the development of mariology, for better or worse. At its worst, the emphasis of some interpreters on the phrasing of Mary's response, "be it done to me according to your word," has led to that ideal of woman as an obedient handmaid, passively receptive to male commands, which women today find so obnoxious. But other interpretations are possible. By examining three facets of this text, namely, its literary structure, language about the Holy Spirit, and the import of Mary's consent, we can draw this rich scene into a liberating memory replete with "lessons of encouragement."

Literary Structure

In this scene Luke deftly combines two conventions of biblical narrative, the birth announcement and the commissioning of the prophet. Both

types of stories follow the same literary structure, which in its complete form comprises five standard elements. First, an angel or some other form of messenger from heaven appears with a greeting. Next, the recipient reacts with fear or awe and is encouraged not to be afraid. Third, central to the story, the announcement itself declares God's intent and gives a glimpse of what the future outcome will be. Fourth, the recipient then offers an objection: How so? Fifth, the story ends with a sign of divine power that reassures the recipient. This story pattern is used at significant junctures in Israel's history both to announce the coming birth of a significant child and to describe the call of adult persons into collaboration with God's designs. The scriptures are replete with examples. A birth story: when the Israelites were groaning under a foreign oppressor, an angel of the Lord appeared to a barren woman, wife of Manoah, to declare that she would conceive and bear a son who would deliver Israel from the hand of the Philistines. The dynamism of the structured story line runs on, ending with the sign of the angel ascending in the flame of the sacrificial altar, followed by the birth of Samson, in whom the Spirit stirred at an early age (Judg. 13:2-23). In a similar fashion, the classic birth announcement heralds the coming of Ishmael to Hagar, Isaac to Abraham and Sarah, John the Baptist to Zechariah and Elizabeth, and Jesus to Joseph (in Matthew's gospel).⁹⁹ The Christmas morning gospel presents a familiar example in the story of angels appearing to the shepherds, which follows the pattern of appearance, fear and reassurance, message about the birth of the Messiah, and the sign of a babe in swaddling clothes lying in a manger. By using this fixed literary pattern to announce the birth of Jesus to Mary, Luke is linking mother and child to the great sweep of God's gracious history with Israel and heralding the significance of this child in that history.

Luke fuses this function of the announcement story with the second scriptural use of this literary form, which is to call and commission a prophet. One particularly telling example is the story of Moses (Exod. 3:1-14). While he is shepherding flocks in the desert, (1) the angel of the Lord appears to him in a burning bush; (2) Moses takes off his shoes, hides his face in fear; (3) then comes the message: God has seen the misery of the people enslaved in Egypt, has heard their cries, feels what they are suffering, and has come down to deliver them: "Come I will send you to Pharaoh to bring my people, the Israelites, out of Egypt"; (4) Moses' objection follows as the night the day: "Who am I?" too slow of speech; (5) finally, God gives assurance with the indelible words "I will be with you," coupled with

a sign in the form of a future promise that, once freed, the people will worship on this very mountain. Here the five-point pattern of the announcement story narrates the moment when Moses, prophet and liberator, enters into his life's vocation. It signals God's intent to deliver an enslaved people, for which task a human being is chosen and for which this person's free assent is essential. Once the die is cast, the presence of God will guide this person through thick and thin, and the community will remember him with gratitude for the ways in which his response brought blessing upon the oppressed people. In the beginning, though, it is a religious encounter that transpires in the solitude of the heart before God: the exiled shepherd, the flaming bush, the prophetic call, the free response, all embedded in the tradition of a community now struggling for freedom.

Another clear instance of this pattern at work is the story of Gideon, set in a time when the people were groaning under conquerors from the land of Midian (Judg. 6:11–24).¹⁰⁰ The angel of the Lord appears under an oak tree; Gideon's fear is met with the classic reassurance, "The Lord is with you"; then comes the message that Gideon is to deliver Israel from the oppressive hand of Midian: "I hereby commission you"; but, objects Gideon, my clan is the weakest of all; nevertheless, "I will be with you," and the sign is fire that consumes his sacrificial bread and meat. The call of other prophets and liberators in the history of Israel often follows this pattern, Jeremiah being another memorable example.

Luke's artistry welds the announcement of Jesus' birth to the call of Mary as a woman commissioned by God. Biblical scholars point out that in this scene she is engaged for a prophetic task, one in a long line of God-sent deliverers positioned at significant junctures in Israel's history.¹⁰¹ All five elements of the literary convention march in full, vigorous display. The angel appears with the classic greeting "Hail, favored one, the Lord is with you," a formula often used to greet a person chosen by God for a special purpose in salvation history. Mary reacts with a troubled heart and receives the classic encouragement not to be afraid. The messenger announces that she will conceive a child who will be great, son of the Most High, inheriting the throne of David in a kingdom without end. Her objection "How can this be?" is met with the promise that the Holy Spirit will be with her. The promise is underscored with the sign of old Elizabeth's pregnancy. Replete with angelic voice, fear and reassurance, message, objection, and sign, this is a story of Mary being commissioned to carry forward God's design for redemption. The announcement of her impending motherhood

is at the same time her prophetic calling to act for the deliverance of the people. She now takes her place "among those prophets called to give word and witness to the hidden plan of God's salvific activity not yet seen by other members of the community of faith."¹⁰² Her affirmative response to this divine initiative sets her life off on an adventure into the unknown future. The divine presence will be with her through good times and bad, and ultimately the community will remember her life with gratitude. In this scene the whole story is captured in its beginning: it is a prophetic vocation story of a Jewish girl and her God, set within the traditions of her people struggling for freedom.

Holy Spirit

At the center of this story lies a powerful declaration of the relationship between this peasant woman and the Spirit of God. In good standard fashion Mary has objected, "How can this be since I do not know man?" The angel replies, "The Holy Spirit will come upon you, and the power of the Most High will overshadow you," and thus the child will be called holy; Son of God. By the fourth and fifth centuries, once church councils had declared the doctrinal identity of Jesus Christ to be that of one person in two natures, human and divine, the Christian imagination interpreted this Lukan text in a literally sexual way. Mary the virgin was somehow impregnated by the Spirit of God, which resulted in Jesus' having a human mother and a divine father; this ensured the truth of his two natures. The difficulty with this interpretation, however, lies partly in the fact that nowhere in scripture is the Spirit's action that "comes upon" and "overshadows" a person analogous to sexual intercourse. Rather, these verbs indicate the presence of God who empowers and protects:

• *Eperchesthai* ("come upon") in Greek literally signifies the coming and going of persons or things such as ships. This rootedness in physical movement in space equips the word to function figuratively to point to the intangible approach of the living God. Carrying the notion of onrushing, overpowering vitality, it tells of divine presence on the move creating something new. A prime example is Jesus' saying in Acts that assures his disciples after his resurrection, "You will receive power when the Holy Spirit has come upon you" (Acts 1:8). When this does indeed happen, the women and men of his circle are empowered to preach the good news to the ends of the earth. This same sense of empowerment is well attested in

the Hebrew Bible. After Samuel's anointing, "the Spirit of the Lord came mightily upon David from that day forward," beginning his march toward kingship (1 Sam. 16:13). Isaiah foretells devastation "until the Spirit comes upon us from on high," when a period of blessed refreshment will begin (Isa. 32:15). These and other biblical examples make clear that the Spirit "coming upon" someone is not sexual but creatively empowering in a broader sense. It connotes the approach of the power of God in a decisively new way.

• *Episkiazain* ("overshadow") in Greek literally means to cast a shadow on something. In contemporary Western parlance this may have a negative, ominous ring. In the Middle East, however, where the sun is so strong it can fry your brains, the cooling shadow of a little tree or even the wall of a building is much appreciated. When used in scripture with reference to God, "overshadowing" thus has the positive meaning of manifesting powerful divine protection over a person or even the whole people. The word is often coupled with concrete images such as a moving cloud or sheltering wings under whose shadow persons find refuge, figurative ways of speaking about God's protection from harm. John Calvin thought the cloud was a particularly "elegant metaphor" for divine presence insofar as it conceals as much as it reveals, covering over divine glory with a haze of brilliance.¹⁰³ With this nuance, the overshadowing cloud resonates with allusions to the *Shekinah*, the indwelling, saving presence of the Holy One in later rabbinic writings.

Two other instances closely parallel this verb's meaning in the annunciation text. In the exodus story a cloud settles on the tent of meeting that Moses pitched in the desert: "the cloud overshadowed it and the glory of the Lord filled the tabernacle" (Exod. 40:34ff.). When the cloud rose, the people followed it and trekked on; when it settled down on the tabernacle, they rested. Casting a shadow by day, shot through with fire at night, "the movement of the cloud directs the journey toward freedom."¹⁰⁴ What is being spoken of here is the presence of God. Signified by the cloud, this presence protects, refreshes, directs, liberates. Again, all three Synoptic Gospels use the same verb in their account of Jesus' transfiguration: "Then a cloud overshadowed them, and from the cloud there came a voice . . ." (Mark 9:7; Matt. 17:5; Luke 9:34). As in the Sinai story, the action of the cloud, itself a metaphor of divine presence, brings God close to the scene with gracious, redemptive intent. The voice speaks the same message about Jesus' being the Son of God as was already heard at the baptism, and the two scenes are

parallel. The Spirit descends like a dove, the cloud of glory overshadows, and Jesus' messianic identity is revealed.

Overshadowing, then, always means the Spirit of God drawing near and passing by to save and protect. Given this usage, given that neither in secular nor religious language does the word ever function as a euphemism for sexual intercourse, it is clear that the Holy Spirit's overshadowing Mary in the annunciation story is, as Carsten Colpe insists, "the opposite of human procreation."¹⁰⁵ What is being described is not a god impregnating a mortal woman such as occurs in Hellenistic stories of sacred marriage. Luke does not mean that God acts as a substitute male sexual partner. Indeed, Paul can write of Isaac that he was "the child who was born according to the Spirit" (Gal. 4:29) without implying that Abraham's sexual paternity was absent. As the ecumenical authors of *Mary in the New Testament* teach, "the overshadowing of 1:35 has no sexual implication." Rather, the term comes from a tradition "where no sexual import is possible. God is not a sexual partner but a creative power in the begetting of Jesus."¹⁰⁶ Remembering the female imagery used in scripture of the Holy Spirit—*ruah*, mother, Sophia—further strengthens this philological insight. The Spirit does not mate with Mary.

Hence, the angel does not answer Mary's objection with a satisfactory description of the mechanics of "how shall this be." Joseph Fitzmyer's judgment about what happened historically is the baseline from which all theologizing should proceed: "What really happened? We shall never know."¹⁰⁷ In view of the religious meaning of Mary's pregnancy, however, we know a great deal. The text declares that the creative presence of God's Spirit will be with her. As Schaberg explains, "What is the essence of this second angelic response? It is this: You should trust; you will be empowered and protected by God. The reversal of Elizabeth's humiliation shows that nothing is impossible for God."¹⁰⁸ Recall how in the opening scene in Genesis, the Spirit of God blows like a mighty wind over the dark waters and the world came into being. Just so, in this new moment of the renewal of creation, the Spirit is on the move again. Recall, furthermore, the Easter proclamation that it is by the Spirit that Jesus is raised from the dead and made Son of God in power. Just so, the same life-giving Spirit creates him as Son of God at his conception.¹⁰⁹ The point for our remembering here is that both in its structure as a commissioning story and in its metaphors of the Spirit's coming upon and overshadowing, this scene with its primary christological interest is a theophany. It places this woman in deep, atten-

tive relation to the Spirit of God. Mary belongs in the company of those whom Spirit-Sophia approaches: "From generation to generation she enters into holy souls and makes them friends of God and prophets" (Wis. 7:27). We do not have access to Mary's religious experience, but can simply say that by the power of the Spirit she encountered the mystery of the living God, the gracious God of her life, the saving Wisdom of her people. In that encounter, the die was cast for the coming of the Messiah.

Consent

All of this takes place as a result of God's free initiative. As always in biblical portrayals of divine interaction with human beings, divine freedom does not override created freedom but waits upon our free response, which, in a theology of grace, God has already made possible. Hearing the divine call, Mary decides to say yes. Casting her lot with the future, she responds with courage and, as the next scene of the visitation will show, with joy and prophecy to this unexpected call: "And Mary said, 'Behold the handmaid of the Lord. Be it done to me according to your word.'" Here Luke innovates by adding Mary's verbal consent as a sixth, climactic element to the literary structure of the announcement story, whose design normally has five points whether used for prophetic commissioning or foretelling birth. "In none of the twenty-seven Hebrew Bible commissionings, none of the ten nonbiblical accounts, none of the fifteen other commissionings in Luke-Acts, and none of the nine other New Testament commissionings . . . are the commissioned ones depicted as assenting verbally and directly to their commission," Schaberg analyzes.¹¹⁰ Luke's innovation is meant to underscore Mary's conscious and active faith as one who hears the word of God and keeps it. Here I am. *Fiat*. Her stance is one that affirms her own identity in the act of radical trust in God, based on a bedrock conviction that God is faithful. Over the centuries many persons have understood and been inspired by this.

In our day, however, Luke's intention is subverted by the language of slavery. In the original Greek of the gospels the word *doûlê*, which is usually translated "handmaid," literally means female slave girl; *kyriou* means literally "master" or "lord." The relationship signified by this phrase "handmaid of the Lord" is thus enormously problematic in feminist and womanist theology. As we already criticized, centuries of patriarchal interpretation have labeled Mary's response as submissive obedience and have held up this stance as the proper ideal for all women in relation to men, a

view antithetical to women's hopes for their own human dignity. The bias involved becomes clearer by contrast, as Luise Schottroff points out: when Paul uses *doûlos* to describe himself (Rom. 1:1), interpreters think of ministry and office rather than of humble obedience.¹¹¹ Traditional demands for conformity to patriarchal order and for obedience to male religious authority figures, be they God, husband, or priest, make women shudder before this text and reject it as dangerous to physical and psychological health as well as to a liberating spirituality.

One might argue to the contrary that obedience, which word in fact does *not* appear in the text, comes from the Latin *ob-audire*, meaning "to listen," in this case to listen to the word of God. One might also point out that Luke is here depicting Mary as the ideal disciple, whose chief characteristic is hearing the word of God and keeping it, doing it, acting upon it, responding to it, this being the model for both women and men disciples without distinction. Again, one might take *doûlê* in its most literal meaning, a female slave, connect it with the Pentecost story where Mary also appears, and interpret it as an instance of the glorious freedom of the last days when God's Spirit will be poured out upon all flesh, yes, "even upon my slaves, both men and women, in those days I will pour out my Spirit, and they shall prophesy" (Acts 2:18, citing Joel 2:28-32). This interpretation has the advantage of showing how the advent of the Spirit lifts up the lowly, reverses their low estate, unseals their lips, and empowers them to prophesy. Again, one may even translate the term *doûlê* not as handmaid or female slave but as the generic "servant," thereby linking Mary to the whole lineage of distinguished faithful servants of God including Abraham and Moses, Deborah and Hannah, culminating with the Servant of Yahweh in Isaiah.¹¹² But helpful though such moves may be, they do not get at the root of the problem, which is the master-slave relationship, now totally abhorrent in human society and no longer suitable as a metaphor for relationship to God, certainly not in feminist theological understanding. African American women who write the theology out of the heritage of slavery and subsequent domestic servitude stress this repugnance even more strongly in unmistakable terms. Slavery is an unjust, sinful situation. It makes people into objects owned by others, denigrating their dignity as human persons. In the case of slave women, their masters have the right not only to their labor but to their bodies, making them into tools of production and reproduction at the master's wish. In such circumstances the Spirit groans with the cries of the oppressed, prompting persons not to obey but to resist, using all their wiles.

Rather than defending this master–slave metaphor as written by Luke in a world where it was not questioned, a more satisfying strategy allows us to criticize it and then look for the liberating reality at the core of Mary's response. Very carefully we peel off the layers of saccharine humility and forced subordination. This young peasant girl discerns the voice of God in her life commissioning her to a momentous task. Exercising independent thought and action, she asks questions, takes counsel with her own soul. In a self-determining act of personal autonomy, she decides to go for it. This is her choice and it changes her life. A woman of Spirit, she embarks on the task of partnering God in the work of redemption. African American theologian Diana Hayes describes Mary's action here as one of "outrageous authority"; standing alone, she yet had enough faith in herself and in her God to say a powerful and prophetic yes.¹¹³ From a Latin American viewpoint, Ana María Bidegain argues that far from signifying "self-denial, passivity, and submission as the essential attributes of women," Mary's consent is a free act of self-bestowal for the purpose of co-creating a new world. In this light, "Mary's humility consists in the daring to accept the monumental undertaking proposed to her by God"; her consent is a free and responsible act, "not the yes of self-denial."¹¹⁴ In consort with other Asian thinkers, Chung Hyun Kyung emphasizes the risk this decision involved. Mary's initial hesitation was well founded, for her choice turned her world upside down. She was not a heroic superwoman but a village woman of the people, albeit one who was attentive to God's calling, and this calling drew her from her own private safety. "With fear and trembling she takes the risk of participating in God's plan out of her vision of redeemed humanity. . . . Jesus was born through the body of this woman, a liberated, mature woman, who had a mind and will of her own, capable of self-determination and perseverance in her decisions."¹¹⁵

Women note that in this scene God speaks directly to Mary, the message not being mediated through her father, betrothed spouse, or priest. In addition, she does not turn to any male authority figure either to be advised or to seek permission regarding what is to be done. Indeed, the setting is not the temple with its priestly cult, where Zechariah earlier received his announcement, but her own lay, female space, in the village. While still operating within a patriarchal text, she is portrayed in terms of her relationship to God independent of men's control, a stance that in itself undermines patriarchal ideology. Poet Kathleen Norris notes how in this scene Mary finds her voice, rather than losing it. Like any prophet, she asserts

herself before God saying, "Here am I." This picture of a young woman courageously committing herself in turn "may provide an excellent means of conveying to girls that there is something in them that no man can touch; that belongs only to them, and to God."¹¹⁶

Existentially, Mary's response carries with it a fundamental definition of her personhood. Facing a critical choice, she sums herself up "in one of those great self-constituting decisions that give shape to a human life."¹¹⁷ In a by now classic analysis of the human situation, Valerie Saiving observed that, conditioned as we are by patriarchy, the traditional "temptations of woman *as woman* are not the same as the temptations of man *as man*." Unlike men, women experience temptations that "have a quality which can never be encompassed by such terms as 'pride' and 'will-to-power.' They are better suggested by . . . underdevelopment or negation of the self."¹¹⁸ Drifting, overdependence on the judgment of others, and self-sacrificing in order to please are but a few examples of feminine traps. The memory that this young woman's decision is not a passive, timid reaction but a free and autonomous act encourages and endorses women's efforts to take responsibility for their own lives. The courage of her decision *vis-à-vis* the Holy One is at the same time an assent to the totality of herself. Remembering Mary's *fat* in this light, Dutch theologian Catharina Halkes writes that far from the passivity imposed on women by a patriarchal society and church, Mary's stance is one of "utmost attentiveness and the creativity which flows from it, based on a listening life."¹¹⁹ Far from being the "proper" attitude of a slave girl, such a grasp of oneself in the world forges a way of integrity in the midst of society's dissipating demands. In the paradigmatic commissioning narrative of the annunciation, encountering God's redemptive grace and empowered by the Spirit, Mary was not *forced* to bear the Messiah. Acting as a responsible moral agent, she made her own choice.

The annunciation is a faith event. Dramatically, this poor, unconventional peasant woman's free and autonomous answer opens a new chapter in the history of God with the world. "It is Mary's faith that makes possible God's entrance into history," writes Ruether,¹²⁰ in the sense that henceforth God will be at home in the flesh of the world in a new way. Brazilian theologians Ivone Gebara and Maria Clara Bingemer note that annunciations keep on happening, bringing into the ordinariness of life a message of God's gracious care and desire to repair the world. Touching the root of our humanity, these messages reveal hidden possibilities within the limits

of our existence, revive our hope in the midst of struggle, and summon our energies for creative action.¹²¹ Seen in this light the particulars of Mary's call, unique in that only one woman conceives and delivers Jesus, illuminate the fundamental dynamic of everyone's vocation through the ages. The Holy One calls all people, indeed all women, and gifts them for their own task in the ongoing history of grace. In the midst of family, work, and social life in village, suburb, and city, it begins with an encounter in the solitude of the heart before God: everywoman, the voice, the call, the courageous response, in the context of a world struggling for life.

The disclosive power of the structure of the annunciation story, along with its central elements of the Spirit's presence and the woman's response, place Miriam of Nazareth in the company of all ancestors in the faith who heard the word of God and responded with courageous love. Now like Abraham, she sets out in faith, not knowing where she is going. Now like Sarah, she receives power to conceive by this faith, considering the One who promised to be worthy of her trust. Listening to the Spirit, rising to the immense possibilities of her call, she walks by faith in the integrity of her own person. Inspired by Spirit-Sophia, women who make their own decisions before God claim her into their circle.

VISITATION: JOY IN THE REVOLUTION OF GOD¹²²

(LUKE 1:39-56)

Fresh from her encounter with the angel, "Mary arose and went with haste into the hill country" to visit her kinswoman Elizabeth, herself swelling with a pregnancy in her old age. Filled with the Spirit, both women burst into glorious speech. Elizabeth salutes Mary, who in turn sings out a prophetic song of praise to God. Known as the Magnificat from its opening word in Latin translation, this canticle can barely contain her joy over the liberation coming to fruition in herself and the world through the creative power of the Spirit. As noted earlier, classical mariology rarely dealt with this prayer. Its radical depiction of Mary's no to oppression completes her earlier yes to solidarity with the project of the reign of God. By sealing this page of scripture, such theology managed to suppress the portrait of Mary as a prophet and to forestall the upheaval that would ensue from oppressed peoples, including women taking a similar stance. Yet as Schaberg rightly describes, "the Magnificat is the great New Testament

song of liberation—personal and social, moral and economic—a revolutionary document of intense conflict and victory. It praises God's actions on behalf of the speaker, which are paradigmatic of all of God's actions on behalf of marginal and exploited people."¹²³ Evoking the powerful memory of God's deliverance of enslaved Israel from Egypt, it praises God's continuing actions throughout history to redeem the lowly, including the speaker herself and all marginal and exploited people. Rooted in Jewish tradition, Mary stands as the singer of the song of justice of the coming messianic age. Tracing the contours of this scene and its theology from a critical biblical and feminist perspective places a dazzling, unmistakably prophetic tile in the mosaic of the critical remembrance of Mary.

Early church writers already interpreted this scene with a prophetic gloss. Ambrose saw in Mary's hurried journey through the hill country of Judea an analogy to the church's stride across the hills of centuries. He connected both travelers to the itinerant prophet of glad tidings depicted by Isaiah who wrote, "How beautiful upon the mountains are the feet of the messenger who announces peace, who brings good news, who announces salvation" (Isa. 52:7). Ambrose then exhorts, "Watch Mary, my children, for the word uttered prophetically of the church applies also to her: 'How beautiful thy sandaled steps, O generous maid!' Yes, generous and beautiful indeed are the church's steps as she goes to announce her gospel of joy: lovely the feet of Mary and the church."¹²⁴ Irenaeus, after showing how Christ became a human being so that human beings might become children of God, depicts Mary's song leading the way for the church's response: "Therefore Mary rejoiced, and speaking prophetically in the church's name she said, 'My soul magnifies the Lord!'"¹²⁵ Finding Mary the prophet in this text thus develops an ancient tradition. In our day new dimensions emerge when this text is read with biblical scholarship through women's eyes.

Two Women Meeting

First, the encounter. The house is Zechariah's but he has been struck dumb. No other men are around. Such quieting of the male voice is highly unusual in scripture. Into this spacious silence two women's voices resound, one praising the other and both praising God. This is a rare biblical vignette of a conversation between two women. Despite the overall androcentric literary context, this story is told in an entirely gynocentric manner.¹²⁶ The outpouring of the Spirit on Elizabeth and Mary happens in traditionally female domestic space. Women are the actors who hold

center stage; women are the speakers who powerfully convey the resounding good news, women themselves embody the mercy of God which they prophetically proclaim. And they do so in the context of meeting and affirming one another.

Both personal and political insights weave their threads into the texture of this scene. In *Just a Sister Away*, African American biblical scholar Renita Weems notes how pregnant women have an almost physical need for the company of others in the same condition to share their fears, find courage, express hopes, and learn practical wisdom about how their bodies are changing.¹²⁷ Being singled out as mothers of redemption made Elizabeth and Mary need each other for this and much more. Having resigned herself to living with disappointment over never having had a child, Elizabeth now has to deal with an "unexpected blessing." Mary in turn has to figure out how to live with a blessing that causes more problems than it solves. How explain this to Joseph? This was not how she had planned her life. Each needed to talk with another woman who knew what it meant to grapple with God's intentions. Their mutual encouragement enabled them to go forward with more confidence and joy despite the struggle that still faced them.

Focusing on "the politics of meeting," Tina Pippin sees that by connecting with each other, these two women are empowered to speak with prophetic voices.¹²⁸ They meet, and the force of their meeting leads them to proclaim in the midst of their history that God blesses the lowly and overthrows oppressive institutions. Through their discourse they image power by setting forth the political meaning of their pregnancies, namely, hope for the dispossessed people of Israel. Here is a rare glimpse of female reproductive power as both physically nurturing and politically revolutionary. "The two pregnant women beat the drum of God's world revolution,"¹²⁹ starting with the option for debased women and then including all the starvings, powerless, and oppressed. A pregnant woman is not the usual image that comes to mind when one thinks of a prophet, yet here are two such spirit-filled pregnant prophets crying out in joy, warnings, and hope for the future. Clearly this is a picture of Mary that is the complete opposite of the passive, humble handmaid of the patriarchal imagination. Susan Ross envisions yet another way this text is dangerous: it portrays women looking to each other for validation of their authority rather than to men. This experience of female solidarity is unequaled in its ability to support women's struggles for equal justice and care, for themselves and

for others.¹³⁰ Whether one sees Elizabeth and Mary as "women of Spirit birthing hope,"¹³¹ or as the Spirit-approved "pregnant crone and the unmarried, pregnant bride suspected of adultery,"¹³² their meeting is powerful and potentially empowering. It brings the theme of women's solidarity and mutual female empowerment into the mosaic of the memory of Mary.

Elizabeth's Song

This older woman had been faithfully walking in the way of God for many long years. Luke draws her portrait using the paint of the Hebrew scripture's barren matriarch tradition, especially the stories of Sarah, Rebekah, Rachel, Samson's mother, and Hannah, and the symbol of the barren Jerusalem.¹³³ The parameters of this tradition are patriarchal: a woman's worth resides in her ability to bear sons for her husband and her people. Rooted in their time and place, the biblical writers seen unable to envision any other kind of world, such as one where women would exercise other social functions and equal value would be given to the birth of daughters. Within their own limited context, however, they signal God's compassionate vindication of the lowly with stories of humiliated women being blessed by conceiving and bearing a son. Long childless but called righteous nevertheless, Elizabeth lives such a story. In the annunciation, her pregnancy has already been used as a sign to encourage Mary at her calling. Now, "Filled with the Holy Spirit," she greets the younger woman with exuberant blessing.

Seeing deep wisdom in this passage of one woman blessing another, Barbara Reid calls attention to the back story. Earlier when Elizabeth had first conceived she said, "So has the Lord done for me" (Luke 1:24).¹³⁴ Compared to her husband's difficult, doubting dialogue with the angel, it is striking how easily she recognizes the grace of God coming into her life. A long life of attentiveness to the Spirit enables her to see that this child is not a gift for Zechariah or her people alone, but signifies God's gracious regard of herself as a loved and valuable person: "so has the Lord done for me." Then, sequestered for six months "alone with God and her silent husband," she nurtures the life within her while contemplating the divine compassion she is experiencing. Elizabeth names the grace in her own life so well that when Mary comes calling, she is prepared to recognize and name the grace of another.¹³⁵ Her experience of God's fidelity is used to give confidence to another:

Blessed are you among women, and blessed is the fruit of your womb. And why is this granted me, that the mother of my Lord should come to me? For behold, when the voice of your greeting came to my ears, the babe in my womb leaped for joy. And blessed is she who believed that there would be a fulfillment of what was spoken to her from the Lord.

Luke does not give Elizabeth the title of prophet, but “filled with the Holy Spirit” she functions like one. She blesses Mary as a woman in her own right first, then her child, then her faith. Her words echo the praise addressed to other women famous in Israelite history who have helped to deliver God’s people from peril. When Jael dispatches an enemy of the people, the prophet Deborah utters, “Most blessed be Jael among women” (Judg. 5:24). After Judith’s spectacular defeat of the enemy general, Uzziah praises her, “O daughter, you are blessed by the Most High God above all other women on the earth” (Jdt. 13:18). The scholars of *Mary in the New Testament* caution that the fact such blessings have been invoked upon other women “prevents us from taking it too absolutely, as if it meant that Mary was the most blessed woman who ever lived.”¹³⁶ The “alone of all her sex” syndrome cannot be inferred from this verse, taken in context. Rather, Elizabeth’s exuberant praise shouted with unrestrained joy joins Mary to solidarity with a long heritage of women whose creative action, undertaken in the power of the Spirit, brings liberation in God’s name. Moreover, this blessing weds her historic pregnancy to her faith, again depicting her as someone who hears the word of God and acts upon it even in her own body.

Mary remained with Elizabeth for about three months. During that time before the birth of John, Zechariah remains silent. Luke does not depict their time together, but in women’s reflection Elizabeth takes Mary in and nurtures her, affirms her calling, nourishes her confidence. Together they chart the changes taking place in their bodies and affirm the grace in their own and each other’s lives. Their gladness hails the advent of the messianic age. The support they share with each other enables them to mother the next generation of prophets, the Precursor and the Savior of the world. On balance, the figure of Elizabeth stands as a moving embodiment of the wisdom and care that older women can offer younger ones, who, brave as they are, are just starting out on their journey through life. A Spirit-filled woman, she exudes blessing on others. Preceding Mary in childbirth and in theologizing, her presence assures the younger woman that she does not face the uncertain future alone. Her mature experience sustains the new

venture. What emerges with undoubted clarity from their interaction is women’s ability to interpret God’s word for other women.

Mary’s Song

Swelling with new life by the power of the Spirit and affirmed by her kinswoman, Mary sings the Magnificat, a canticle that joyfully proclaims God’s gracious, effective compassion at the advent of the messianic age. It should be noted at the outset that as the longest passage put on the lips of any female speaker in the New Testament, this is the most any woman gets to say. Other women have life-changing visions of angels, most significantly at the empty tomb on Easter morning, but while we are told that they proclaim the good news, we unfortunately do not get to hear their own words. The cadences of this canticle stand in righteous criticism against such scriptural silencing of “the lowly.” While Luke may silence the voice of Mary Magdalene, Joanna, and others, our interpretation today reads against his intent, to find in Mary’s song a protest against the suppression of women’s voices and a spark for their prophetic speech. Following the logic of her praise, who can dare tell women they cannot speak?

And Mary said:

“My soul magnifies the Lord,
and my spirit rejoices in God my Savior,
for he has looked with favor on the lowliness of his handmaid.
For behold, henceforth all generations will call me blessed,
for the One who is mighty has done great things for me,
and holy is his name.

And his mercy is from generation to generation on those who fear him.
He has shown strength with his arm;
he has scattered the proud in the imagination of their hearts;
he has put down the mighty from their thrones,
and exalted those of low degree;
he has filled the hungry with good things,
and the rich he has sent empty away.
He has helped his servant Israel,
in remembrance of his mercy,
according to the promise he made to our ancestors,
to Abraham and to his posterity forever.

The Galilean woman who proclaims this canticle stands in the long Jewish tradition of female singers from Miriam with her tambourine (Exod.

15:2–21) to Deborah (Judg. 5:1–31), Hannah (1 Sam. 2:1–10), and Judith (Jdt. 16:1–17), who also sang dangerous songs of salvation.¹³⁷ Their songs are psalms of thanksgiving, victory songs of the oppressed. In particular, the song's form and even whole phrases are explicitly modeled on the canticle of Hannah in the book of Samuel. From Hannah's opening lines, "My heart exults in the Lord; my strength is exalted in my God," to her prophetic verses, "The bows of the mighty are broken, but the feeble gird on strength; those who were full have hired themselves out for bread, but those who were hungry are fat with spoil," the parallelism links both women in their vocal response to the peculiar mercy of Israel's God, who graciously chooses to be in solidarity with those who suffer and are of no account in order to heal, redeem, and liberate.

Composed according to the overall structure of a thanksgiving psalm, which first praises God and then lists the reasons for gratitude, the Magnificat has two main stanzas or strophes. The first praises divine mercy to the speaker and the second reflects the Holy One's victorious deeds for the oppressed community. Far from being separate pieces, the two stanzas are linked theologically by a profound sense of God's faithful compassion, existentially by the atmosphere of joy that results in the lives of the liberated, and socially by virtue of the speaker Mary's being herself a member of the oppressed people who experience redemption. The unity in distinction of the two stanzas, one praising God with deep personal love and the other proclaiming God's justice, can be seen to reflect a way of life basic to Jewish and Christian traditions: love of God and love of neighbor in gospel terms, or spirituality and social justice according to the prophets, or contemplation and action in the tenets of traditional spirituality, or mysticism and resistance in the terms of contemporary theology.¹³⁸ By attending to the way this canticle resonates with the rich biblical traditions that celebrate God's liberation, we add the prophetic Mary, now singing her song of salvation, to our mosaic.

1. God's mercy to the peasant woman: The canticle begins with a poor woman's cry of joy. Mary's soul magnifies the Lord and her spirit rejoices in "God my Savior." This lyric mood, so characteristic of intimate experience of relationship with God, pervades the Jewish biblical tradition. The psalmist sings: "Then my soul shall rejoice in the Lord, exulting in his deliverance" (Ps. 35:9); the prophet Isaiah encourages: "This is the Lord for whom we have waited; let us be glad and rejoice in his salvation" (Isa. 25:9);

even the natural world is caught up in the gladness: "Let all the earth cry out to God with joy" (Ps. 66:1). What does it mean to rejoice in God your Savior? This is not a superficial joy but is written against the whole canvas of the world's pain. It is messianic joy, paschal joy, aware of the struggle unto death yet hopeful that the great "nevertheless" of God leads to life. In the midst of suffering and turmoil, the sense of divine presence in compassionate care offers strength, leading one to be glad that God is great. Mary *magnifies* God her Savior, which in formal Elizabethan English means to celebrate the greatness, or sing and dance in praise of the goodness of someone wonderful.¹³⁹ Her soul and her spirit do this, meaning her whole self, her whole being, with body, mind, and strength. Hers are not the words of half-hearted appreciation. She is caught up, feels herself lifted up into God's good and gracious will. With a foretaste of eschatological delight, she breaks forth in praise and singing.

Mary's song is the prayer of a poor woman. She proclaims God's greatness with her whole being because the Holy One of Israel, regarding her low estate, has done great things for her. The term for lowliness, *tapeinōsis* in Greek, describes misery, pain, persecution, and oppression. In Genesis it describes the situation in the wilderness of the escaping slave woman Hagar, whom God heeds (Gen. 16:11); in the exodus story it describes the severe affliction from which God delivers the people (Exod. 3:7). Mary's self-characterization as lowly is not a metaphor for spiritual humility but is based on her actual social position. Young, female, a member of a people subjected to economic exploitation by powerful ruling groups, afflicted by outbreaks of violence, she belongs to the semantic domain of the poor in Luke's gospel, a group given a negative valuation by worldly powers. Yet it is to precisely such a woman that the call has come to partner God in the great work of redemption. Just such a woman will mother the Messiah because God has regarded her, has turned the divine countenance toward her and let divine pleasure shine upon her. It is not just that God often chooses unconventional people for a task, not just that Mary is among the inconsequential poor of the earth, like unlettered women in any poor village on this planet. It is the combination that is revolutionary: God has regarded *her* precisely as a lowly woman. Her favored status, declared by Gabriel, Elizabeth, and now herself, results from God's surprising and gracious initiative. Rejoicing follows. Here the background picture of a poor, first-century Galilean peasant woman living in occupied territory, struggling for survival and dignity against victimization, imbued with Jewish

faith, aptly coalesces with this biblical portrait of Mary, singer of the song of justice in the name of God.

In his commentary on this canticle, Martin Luther sought to place its sentiments squarely at the center of the church's life. Mary's song gives all of us confidence in God's grace, he teaches, for despite our lowliness God has a "hearty desire" to do great things for us too. What we need is faith, trusting in God as Mary did with "her whole life and being, mind and strength." Then we will be caught up in God's good and gracious will, which operates with kindness, mercy, justice, and righteousness. True, this always involves a reversal of values, "and the mightier you are, the more must you fear; the lowlier you are, the more must you take comfort."¹⁴⁰ But just as the Spirit overshadowed Mary, inspiring her joy and fortitude, so too the Spirit imbues us every day with rich and abundant grace to follow our own calling. The important thing to remember is that Mary had confidence in God, finding in God her Savior a wellspring of joy and comfort. "Thus we too should do; that would be to sing a right Magnificat."¹⁴¹

2. God's mercy to the oppressed people: What begins as praise for divine loving-kindness toward a marginalized and oppressed woman grows in amplitude to include all the poor of the world. The second strophe of the Magnificat articulates the great biblical theme of reversal where lowly groups of people are defended by God while the arrogant end up losers. All through scripture the revelatory experience of the character of God who liberated the Hebrew slaves from bondage finds ongoing expression in texts that praise divine redemptive care for the lost. In the psalms and the prophets, the Holy One of Israel protects, defends, saves, and rescues these "nobodies," adorning them with victory and life in the face of despair. Proclaiming the Magnificat, Mary continues this deep stream of Jewish faith in the context of the advent of the Messiah, now taking shape within her. The approach of the reign of God will disturb the order of the world run by the arrogant, the hard of heart, the oppressor. Through God's action, the social hierarchy of wealth and poverty, power and subjugation, is to be turned upside down. Jubilation breaks out as the proud are scattered and the mighty are pulled from their thrones while the lowly are exalted and mercy in the form of food fills the bellies of the hungry. All will be well, and all manner of thing will be well, because God's mercy, pledged in covenant love, is faithful through every generation.

In all the gospels, Jesus preaches and acts out this vital message of reversal. The Asian women theologians at the Singapore Conference note with

unassailable logic that "with the singer of the Magnificat as his mother, it should not surprise us that Jesus' first words in Luke's account of his public ministry are also a mandate for radical change."¹⁴² The beatitudes encapsulate this message in especially dramatic form: "Happy are you poor . . . you who hunger now . . . you who weep now . . . But woe to you rich . . . who are full now . . . who laugh now"¹⁴³ (Luke 6:20–26). Through his own death and resurrection this same reversal is embodied in Jesus himself, who becomes the mother lode of God's life-giving mercy for the world. By placing the Magnificat on the lips of Mary, Luke depicts her as the spokesperson for God's redemptive justice, which will be such a part of the gospel. She proclaims the good news by anticipation, and she does so as a Jewish woman whose consciousness is deeply rooted in the heritage and wisdom of the strong women of Israel. Knowledgeable about the liberating traditions of her own people and trumpeting them with "tough authority,"¹⁴⁴ this friend of God stands as a prophet of the coming age. "The song of Mary is the oldest Advent hymn," preached Dietrich Bonhoeffer, the German theologian killed by the Nazis:

It is at once the most passionate, the wildest, one might even say the most revolutionary Advent hymn ever sung. This is not the gentle, tender, dreamy Mary whom we sometimes see in paintings; this is the passionate, surrendered, proud, enthusiastic Mary who speaks out here. This song has none of the sweet, nostalgic, or even playful tones of some of our Christmas carols. It is instead a hard, strong, inexorable song about collapsing thrones and humbled lords of this world, about the power of God and the powerlessness of humankind. These are the tones of the women prophets of the Old Testament that now come to life in Mary's mouth.¹⁴⁵

A dispute about the origin of this canticle sheds light on the material significance of this second strophe. Based on its form and religious content, some biblical scholars think that the song was written by the early church in Jerusalem. Its christology, which interprets Jesus as the Davidic Messiah, has Jewish overtones, and its piety is redolent of the prayer of the *anawim*, a term meaning "poor ones." Raymond Brown argues forcefully that the early church in Jerusalem saw themselves as *anawim*, combining as they did material poverty with temple piety.¹⁴⁶ Along with other canticles in Luke's infancy narrative uttered by Zechariah and Simeon, he believes, the Magnificat formed part of the "hymn book"¹⁴⁷ of this Jerusalem community described at the beginning of Acts. For Luke to place the song on Mary's lips, adding the verse about God's regard for his lowly hand-

maid, is artistically and theologically apt, given her Jewish faith, her material poverty, and her probable participation in this post-resurrection community of disciples.

To the contrary, other scholars think that the milieu in which the Magnificat originated was not the religious life of the Jerusalem community but the political struggle of the people of Palestine against their oppressors. The song portrays intense conflict. The six central verbs that describe God's help to Israel denote forceful action: show strength, scatter, pull down, lift up, fill up, send away. There are close parallels between this hymn and other Jewish hymns from the period of arduous resistance to imperial rule, including the *Qumran War Scroll* and hymns celebrating the victory of the Maccabees (today's feast of Hanukkah).¹⁴⁷ Richard Horsley argues that the core subject of the song is God's revolutionary overthrow of the established governing authorities who are squeezing the life out of the people, a view made even more cogent when we recognize that "the words and phrases used throughout the Magnificat are taken from and vividly recall the whole tradition of victory songs and hymns of praise celebrating God's victorious liberation of the people of Israel from their oppressive enemies."¹⁴⁸ Correlatively, there are no *anawim* as a spiritual group; the term applies to the people generally, caught in bad and worsening socioeconomic conditions.

It may be that both views are right in their own way. The Jerusalem community may have taken a preexisting victory hymn already in circulation and adapted it for their own use. Brown notes, furthermore, that the first followers of Jesus were Galileans; that Galilee was the spawning ground of first-century revolts against repressive Roman occupation and the heavy tax burden it laid on people's backs; and that there was real poverty among those who became the nucleus of the post-resurrection church. In this setting, the spiritual themes of the Magnificat have real economic and political resonance as the song declares that these poor people are ultimately the blessed ones, not the mighty and the rich who oppress them.

The value of this debate lies in the way it alerts us to the presence of a memory that is truly dangerous. The history of interpretation contains many instances of thinkers who opt to spiritualize this text, to take away its political teeth, to blunt its radical tone by appeal to the eschatological reversal promised for the last day. Rooted in the biblical heritage of Palestinian Jewish society, however, the song's provenance makes clear that it is

a revolutionary song of salvation whose concrete social, economic, and political dimensions cannot be blunted. People are hungry because of triple monies being exacted for empire, client-king, and temple. The lowly are being crushed because of the mighty on their thrones in Rome and their deputies in the provinces. Now, with the nearness of the messianic age, a new social order of justice and plenty is at hand. Like the beatitudes Jesus proclaims for the poor and brokenhearted, Mary's canticle praises God for the kind of salvation that involves concrete transformations.

People in need in every society hear a blessing in this canticle. The battered woman, the single parent without resources, those without food on the table or without even a table, the homeless family, the young abandoned to their own devices, the old who are discarded—all who are subjected to social contempt are encompassed in the hope Mary proclaims. Working amid the poor in India, R. J. Raja reflects that Mary portrays the God of Israel, who will "not stop short of subverting all satanic structures of oppression, inhuman establishments of inequality, and systems which generate slavery and non-freedom," including those that debase people on account of their birth, caste, sex, creed, color, religion, tenets, weakness, and poverty.¹⁴⁹ It is precisely in this way that God is established as Savior of the people in the face of human degradation. The church in Latin America more than any other is responsible for hearing this proclamation of hope in a newly refreshed way. The Magnificat's message is so subversive that for a period during the 1980s the government of Guatemala banned its public recitation.¹⁵⁰ Seeing the central point of this song to be the assertion of the holiness of God, Peruvian Gustavo Gutiérrez argues, "Any exegesis is fruitless that attempts to tone down what Mary's song tells us about preferential love of God for the lowly and the abused, and about the transformation of history that God's loving will implies."¹⁵¹

This message will not appeal to those who are satisfied with the ways things are. It will also be ignored by those who seek to restore intact some past epoch in the history of culture or religion. Even affluent people of good will have difficulty dealing with its shocking, revolutionary ring. Doesn't God love everyone? Indeed yes, but in an unjust world, the form this universal love takes differs according to circumstance. The language of this canticle makes clear that divine love is particularly on the side of those whose dignity must be recovered. God protects the poor, noticing their tears, while challenging the comfortable and the proud to conversion, to genuine discipleship, even at the loss of their own comfort. The divine

intent is not to take revenge and so create a new order of injustice but to build up a community of sisters and brothers marked by human dignity and mutual regard. Only thus is the coming reign of God rendered genuinely historical. Addressing his economically privileged compatriots, John Haught offers a valuable insight. For those who have little, for the destitute and dispossessed, for the wretched of the Earth, for the *anawim* of Yahweh, he writes, there remains only the ever-coming God of the future to sustain their lives and aspirations. "A major part of the message of prophetic religion is that the dreams that arise among the poor are not naive illusions but compelling clues to the nature of the real. . . . Perhaps only by allowing our own lives to be integrated into the horizon of their dreams and expectations, that is, by our own solidarity with victims, can we too make ourselves vulnerable to the power of the future."¹⁵² Rather than legitimate or ignore the miserable circumstances of the afflicted, those who are affluent need to dream with the poor the dream of God's future that their suffering opens up, and thus be transformed themselves. For both poor and affluent, the Magnificat is a vehicle of that dream.

3. Both stanzas together. This is a profoundly theocentric canticle, centering the singer on God's gracious goodness for personal and communal reasons. In Edward Schillebeek's inimitable phrase, it is a "toast to our God,"¹⁵³ offered in jubilant thanksgiving in the midst of the tragic history of the world. The point for our remembering is that Mary not only sings of God's liberating transformation of the social order in redemptive acts of mercy, but she herself embodies the oppressed people, who have been exalted through God's compassionate action. Like those enumerated in her song, she occupies a position of poverty and powerlessness in her society, and does so with the added oppression that accrues to being a woman of little account. Hence her song puts her in solidarity with other women who strive for life: "Mary appears in its strains no longer as the sweet mother of traditional piety. She is now made to speak in concert with the oppressed wives and the famished mothers of the world."¹⁵⁴ She sings pregnant with hope, bearing the Messiah, embodying the historic reversal she proclaims. Who shall mother the Messiah? Not a well-protected queen, not someone blessed with a bounteous table and a peaceful life, not a well-regarded woman of influence. Indeed, there is nothing wrong with these things; peace and abundant nourishment are among the blessings hoped for in the messianic age. But the world is distorted by sin. People accumulate power and wealth at the expense of others. Suffering is rampant. And the pattern

persists through the generations. Into this unjust situation comes the choice of God, Creator and Redeemer of the world. Hearing the cries of the oppressed, seeing their misery, knowing well what they are suffering, coming down to redeem, the Holy One aims to turn the unjust order of things upside down and make the world right again, being faithful to the covenant promise. In the deepest revelatory insights of Jewish and Christian traditions, there is no other God. Thus God's choice of Mary to give birth to the Messiah is typical of divine action. As Janice Capel Anderson explains, just as "God has chosen a female servant of low estate to bring the Lord into the world and exalted her, so will God overturn the proud, rich and mighty and exalt the pious, hungry, lowly."¹⁵⁵ Read through these eyes, Mary's song of God's victory over the powerful becomes a song about the liberation of the most nondescript poor people on this earth. Imagine the world according to the defiant Mary's Magnificat, invites African writer Peter Daino: a heavenly banquet and all the children fed.¹⁵⁶

Through Women's Eyes

This visitation scene, with its high point in the Magnificat, garners rich attention in women's theological reflection. Once the analysis of patriarchy is in place, Mary's song of God's victory over those who dominate others rings with support for women in the struggle against male domination as well as against racism, classism, heterosexism, and all other demeaning injustice. "Mary's song is precious to women and other oppressed people," Schaberg writes, "for its vision of their concrete freedom from systemic injustice—from oppression by political rulers on their "thrones" and by the arrogant and rich." Mary preaches, she continues, as a prophet of the poor and those who are marginalized. "She represents their hope, as a woman who has suffered and been vindicated."¹⁵⁷

The Spirit who vivified Mary and empowered her prophetic voice is the same Spirit who inspires and vivifies women of all ages. Remembering her in the cloud of witnesses, women draw many and varied lessons of encouragement in her company. One of the strongest and most unusual in the light of traditional mariology is the right to say no. "Men toiling in the service of male power interests represent Mary only as the woman who knew how to say yes."¹⁵⁸ Indeed, at the annunciation Mary uttered her yes to the call of God's Spirit, a consent to adventure that has been used so abominably to promote the passive submission of women. Here her *fiat* finds its home in her defiant resistance to the powers of evil. She takes on as her

own the divine no to what crushes the lowly, stands up fearlessly and sings out that it will be overturned.¹⁵⁹ No passivity here, but solidarity with divine outrage over the degradation of life and with the divine promise to repair the world. In the process she bursts out of the boundaries of male-defined femininity while still every inch a woman. Singing of her joy in God and God's victory over oppression, she becomes not a subjugated but a prophetic woman.

Catholic women in whose tradition Mary has been a significant figure wrestle with the significance of this canticle for their own subordinate position in current church structures. With no little irony, Gebara and Bingenier cite the homily preached by Pope John Paul II in Zapopán, Mexico, where he pointed to Mary of the Magnificat as a model for those "who do not passively accept the adverse circumstances of personal and social life and are not victims of alienation, as they say today, but who with her proclaim that God 'raises up the lowly' and, if necessary, 'overthrows the powerful from their thrones.'"¹⁶⁰ If this is applied to women's struggle for full participation in governance and ministry in the church, the reversals of the Magnificat become rife with significance for ecclesial life. "How is it possible," Marie-Louise Gubler writes, "to pray Mary's song each night at Vespers without drawing spiritual and structural consequences for the church?"¹⁶¹ Indeed, Mary's prophetic speech characterizes as nothing less than *mercy* God's intervention into a patriarchal social order. Not only Mary but the women disciples in Luke, "believing sisters of Jesus' believing mother," grasp that God is no longer to be sought in the clouds, as the men of Galilee once thought, but here on earth, in the flesh, in birth, and in a grave, however surprisingly empty. God is to be sought and found in daily encounters with suffering, in tears and in the laughter of the poor, in the hungry of this earth, and in the groaning of creation. "Mary's prophetic song stands at the beginning of all this. How is it, then, that the body of the resurrected one, in the dual sense of sacrament and the church, has ended up exclusively in the hands of men?"¹⁶² Susan Ross's critique spells out the implications. In many ways in the church, the mighty still occupy their thrones; the lowly still await their exaltation. "Women's very real lack of power in the church today stands as an indictment of the power structures as they exist. . . . The scandal of women's exclusion from power cannot be overlooked. Therefore any discussion of the empowerment of women must be juxtaposed with our lack of political and symbolic power and the failure of the leadership of the church to rectify this scandal."¹⁶³ In addi-

tion to hope against their dispossessed status, women glean from this text grains of encouragement for their own creative behavior. Ruether sees in this canticle an example of a woman becoming a theological agent in her own right, actively and cooperatively figuring out the direction of the Spirit in the crisis of her time.¹⁶⁴ Norris treasures Mary as an original biblical interpreter, linking her people's hope to a new historical event.¹⁶⁵ In the context of hierarchical power that has silenced women's voices through the centuries, Schaberg casts Mary positively as a preacher. Noting the powerful proclamation of the good news that issues from her mouth, she writes, "Without an explicit commission to preach, she preaches as though she was commissioned," that is, with authority.¹⁶⁶ In the struggle against sexism in the church, the great reversals roll on, their tone of judgment and promise resounding in the voices of prophetic women today.

It is above all in the reflections of women in the church of the poor that the profound dimensions of Mary's prophecy become clear. The Puebla Document, issued by the bishops of Latin America, describes the situation: "The poor do not lack simply material goods. They also miss, on the level of human dignity, full participation in sociopolitical life. Those found in this category are principally our indigenous people, peasants, manual laborers, marginalized urban dwellers, and in particular, the women of these social groups. The women are doubly oppressed and marginalized,"¹⁶⁷ not only because they are poor but because they are women in a society where machismo reigns. So described, Latin American women in base Christian communities recognize a striking analogy between their own situation and that of Miriam of Nazareth. Both dwell in poverty as a result of structural injustices in the economic order; both inhabit worlds organized around the idea of masculine superiority and the inhibition of women's gifts; indigenous women suffer added indignities due to their racial heritage and culture. Appreciation grows: Mary is one of us. This racial context becomes a "sound box" that amplifies the Magnificat.¹⁶⁸ Mary sings this song as a woman of the people, like millions of poor peasant women in Latin America, doubly and triply oppressed, old before their time. God regards her lowliness, as God regards theirs. Pregnant with new life, she cries out for transformation of the old order, as do they. She belongs to the tradition of women who beget their people amid suffering and despair.¹⁶⁹ Who but a strong decisive woman would call down God's justice on the heads of the oppressors of the poor? Her song sets out the game plan of the coming reign of God. It reveals that women fully partic-

ipate in the mission of announcing and bringing about these redemptive changes. And it keeps hope alive that poor women themselves, the least of the least, will taste justice on this earth according to the promise that God's "mercy is from age to age, on those who fear him." "Mary's song is a war chant," write Gebara and Bingemer with perhaps too much enthusiasm for a military metaphor, "God's battle song enmeshed in human history, in the struggle to establish a world of egalitarian relationships, of deep respect for each individual, in whom godhead dwells."¹⁷⁰ In solidarity with her song, women on every continent find a key source for their spiritual journey and practice of the reign of God.

The multi-hued mosaic chip of the visitation scene gives us an image of Mary, reassured and applauded by another woman, speaking with prophetic authority a liberating hymn of praise. Regarding this canticle, Luther made a wise observation: "She sang it not for herself alone but for all of us, to sing it after her."¹⁷¹ Doing so places us in intense relationship to the living God, overflowing source of hope and joy, who regards the suffering world with utmost mercy and summons us together into the struggle to build a just and human world.

"AND SHE GAVE BIRTH"

(LUKE 2:1-20)

This tessera shines with the quintessence of both bodilyness and spirituality. Mary's pregnancy ended when she gave birth, an experience that connects her with women around the world who bring forth the next generation of human beings out of their own bodies. The scene in Luke is, after the cross, the most widely recognized image in Christianity. In Bethlehem Mary gives birth to her firstborn son and lays him in a manger; angels sing the revelatory canticle announcing that this child is the Savior, Christ the Lord; shepherds visit, marvel, and return praising God; Mary ponders the meaning of it all in her heart. From much of the great art of the European Renaissance to popular commercial depictions, this birth has been bathed in a golden light commensurate with the glory of God in the angels' song. All too often it has elicited responses that range from deep to shallow sentimentality. More than any other biblical scene it has traditionally played into the ideology that sets parameters around women's lives with the dictate that their one and only God-given vocation is to be moth-

ers. To restore this tessera to its original colors for our mosaic, we look at its elements of lowliness, bloodiness, and thoughtfulness.

Among the Poor

In Luke's story a number of elements flag the difficulty of this birth, starting with the uprootedness of its setting. Joseph of Nazareth leaves home with "Mary his betrothed," who is far along in her pregnancy. Their journey is undertaken because of a decree of the Roman emperor Caesar Augustus that all should be enrolled in their ancestral towns. Biblical scholars, finding no evidence of such an edict in Roman records that would fit the time frame of Jesus' birth, normally conclude that Luke has used an actual registration that occurred later in 6 C.E. and crafted it for his own purposive storytelling.¹⁷² In terms of a marian portrait, the dislocation that this trip requires becomes but the first in a series of signals that this is not a powerful family but one ranked among the lowly. The purpose of the census is to count heads for tax purposes. The Roman emperor can command tribute; the colonized villagers must hustle to obey. Thus does dominating authority ever bestride the earth, pushing around the poor of the land who have little power to change their status, unless they want to take up arms.

Far from home, these expectant parents are depicted in lowly circumstances. With "no room for them in the inn," they take shelter in a cave or stall where animals were stabled. And there "the time came for her to be delivered." In this unfamiliar, uncomfortable situation, she gave birth. It is not a great stretch of the imagination to see Mary and Joseph as transients, "equivalent to the homeless of contemporary city streets, people who lack adequate shelter,"¹⁷³ or as marginalized persons pushed to the edge, "like squatters living in the shanty towns of many big cities of the third world."¹⁷⁴ In this setting, Mary, a young woman in a patriarchal society, brought her child into the world in the manner of enormously disadvantaged people, without the security of a home. She wrapped him in swaddling clothes, the traditional Palestinian way of securing a newborn, and laid him in a manger. Mentioned three times in this passage, a manger was a feeding trough for domesticated animals. It could be a movable wooden container or a low curved depression on a rocky ledge.¹⁷⁵ While it served the purpose of cradling a baby, as do cardboard boxes and other such artifacts creatively appropriated by poor people today, its previous use