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Mary of Nazareth: Friend of God and Prophet

Elizabeth A. Johnson
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What would be a theologically sound, spiritually empowering and ethically challenging theology of Mary, mother of Jesus the Christ, for the 21st century? This question has no simple answer, for the first-century Jewish woman Miriam of Nazareth, also held in faith to be Theotokos, the God-bearer, is arguably the most celebrated woman in the Christian tradition. One could almost drown surveying the ways different eras have honored her in painting, sculpture, icons, architecture, music and poetry; venerated her with titles, liturgies, prayers and feasts; and taught about her in spiritual writings, theology and official doctrine. The title of a fine book by George Tavard gets it exactly right: *The Thousand Faces of the Virgin Mary.*

Our answer becomes even more complex in the light of recent scholarship that highlights the social-political implications of this adaptable Marian image. Studies underscore, for example, the correlation between Our Lady of Fatima and cold war opposition to the Soviet Union; or the connection between the Madonna of 125th Street and the struggle of newly arrived Italian immigrants for survival in New York City; or the alliance between Our Lady of Guadalupe and Cesar Chavez's struggle for justice for migrant workers in the California vineyards. While a historical woman obviously dwells at the root of this whole phenomenon, her image has been plastic, allowing the Christian imagination to create widely different Marian symbols and theologies in relation to spiritual and social needs.

Now it is our turn. How do we, this multicultural church at this millennial time, interpret and honor her? Let me emphasize that the answer explored here is but one among several good options. In a word, I propose that we approach Mary of

Nazareth along the avenue of historical memory and envision her, dangerously, as a friend of God and prophet within the communion of saints. This coheres with the pattern of Scripture, which inscribes her story among that of others in the company of Jesus. It also accords with the deliberate decision of the Second Vatican Council to place Marian teaching within its teaching on the church rather than in a separate document, a move followed by documents of the magisterium ever since.

A theology of Mary as friend of God and prophet in the communion of saints endeavors to carry forward this trajectory. Working out this view entails, metaphorically, that we invite Mary down from the pedestal where she has been honored in the past to rejoin us on the ground of the community of grace in history. The ladder enabling her to reach the ground has at least four steps. Walking down these steps will form the structure of this lecture.

A Member of the Communion of Saints

Bringing Mary into the community of the saints may seem strange at first hearing, even though the name Saint Mary graces many churches and schools. But think what we mean by this. Down through the centuries, as the Holy Spirit graces person after person in land after land, they form together a grand company of "friends of God and prophets" (Wis. 7:27); a community of holy people endeavoring to live their lives praising God, loving each other and struggling for justice and peace. This is a company that not only encircles the globe in space but stretches backward and forward in time. It also includes those who have died and now live in the embrace of God. Since Mary was a first-century Jewish woman of faith, and since she has obviously also died, she belongs in this company of grace.

Once we admit Mary into our company, the question of how to relate to her arises. In my research I have discovered that two possibilities lie open. In one, the patronage model that has dominated the tradition, Mary and the saints are approached primarily as intercessors before the throne of God. Here we imagine that God exists like a king ruling in splendor, with courtiers ranked in descending order of importance. Being far from the distant throne, we little people need more important people to plead our cause and obtain spiritual and material blessings.

We need friends in high places, so to speak. Because she is the Mother of the Lord, Mary is the most powerful intercessor of all, obtaining gifts that might otherwise be denied.

This patron-client relationship is found neither in the New Testament nor in the early Christian centuries. It developed in the late Roman empire under the influence of the civil patronage system once the church had been officially established. The earlier way for the living to relate to the dead saw them all as companions to one another in the one Spirit-filled community. This companionship model situates the saints in heaven not *between* God and those on earth but *alongside* their sisters and brothers in Christ. The Letter to the Hebrews envisions them as a great cloud of witnesses surrounding us and cheering us on to victory with the encouragement of their lives (Heb. 12:1). As Augustine preached, "When we pay honor to the martyrs, we are honoring the friends of Christ" (*Sermon* 332.1), who are also our friends following after the same love.

In the companionship model, rather than the main action being prayers of petition from client to patron, the chief practice is attending to the memory of the dead in a way that energizes hope. Johannes Baptist Metz's theology of the dangerous memory reveals the power of this practice, for such remembering disrupts the tyranny of the present status quo, summons up a future worth struggling for and sets our feet on the path of their unfinished business. Commemorations of the martyrs of El Salvador that inspire us to action on behalf of justice for the poor and celebrations of Mary Magdalene, first witness of the resurrection, that encourage us to promote women's participation in ministry are good contemporary examples. This is not to say that we no longer call upon saints to pray for us; but this prayer occurs in a context of mutual sharing in the project of the reign of God. Remembering their dangerous witness, we become partners in hope.

Within this vast cloud of witnesses, particular persons emerge who live out God's promise in special ways. When these persons are recognized by the spiritual intuition of the community as a whole, they become publicly significant for the lives of others. Such a person is Miriam of Nazareth, a poor woman of faith who

partnered God throughout her life, especially in the redemptive work of mothering the Messiah. Two obstacles, however, block the full retrieval of her dangerous memory.

Not the Maternal Face of God

It has become commonplace for scholars of Marian history to argue that Mary embodies aspects of God best symbolized in the female form of the mother. Historically, ample evidence for this transfer of divine imagery can be found in early Christian times, when the Mother of God took over the titles, shrines, iconography and power of the great mother goddess of the Mediterranean world. This "baptizing" of pagan imagery was a successful missionary strategy that allowed Christianity to attract peoples accustomed to female deities while still maintaining faith in God as Father, Son and Holy Spirit. Ever since, a tendency to transfer divine qualities to Mary has dogged the Marian tradition. Especially in periods when theology was deficient, she conveyed the power of God to work miracles for favored ones, the mercy of Christ to save sinners and the presence of the Holy Spirit bestowing divine intimacy. Her gender as a woman and her historical role as a mother played no small part in these developments, for what compassionate mother would let one of her children suffer or be lost? Mary functioned to reveal divine love as compassionately close, interested, trustworthy and attractivesomething that gets lost from view when the prevailing notion of God is that of an authority figure on the model of a heartless just judge or a somewhat testy heavenly father.

This analysis is helpful for understanding some of the exaggerations of Marian theology and devotion. It makes clear that the Marian symbol developed divine qualities to compensate for an overly patriarchal theology of God. But a problem arises when theologians want to maintain this state of affairs in perpetuity. The Brazilian theologian Leonardo Boff's treatise on Mary as *The Maternal Face of God,* for example, proposes that just as the Son of God became incarnate in Jesus, so too the Holy Spirit, the female person of the Trinity, became embodied in

Mary, thus somewhat balancing the gender of the Christian God. The trouble with this hypothesis is that Mary is not and never will be divine, but is always and everywhere thoroughly human.

As we have received it, the Marian tradition is a fruitful source of female imagery for God, such as maternity with its nurturing warmth and fierce protection; love with unbounded compassion; power that sustains, heals and liberates; and all-pervading immanence. These divine qualities migrated to Mary because of deficiencies in the theology of God, in Christology and in pneumatology. It makes no lasting sense to retain this as a permanent status quo, using Mary as a cover-up for defective notions of the divine. Rather, this female imagery should be allowed to travel back to its source and fertilize our imaginations and piety in relation to the mystery of God, who is beyond gender but is creator of both women and men in the divine image. The Australian theologian Patricia Fox, S.M., demonstrates this strategy in her address, "Mother of Mercy: A Title Reclaimed for God," as do Julian of Norwich, John Paul I and myriad other Christians today who dare to name God in female form. Let God have her own maternal face.

While critically deconstructing the Marian symbol as the maternal face of God, there is one insight we can carry forward from this distorted pattern. The fact that divine mercy and power have indeed been successfully carried in the image of Mary reveals the capacity of women to represent God. Not just Mary's face but the face of every woman is created as an *imago Dei.* Not just Mary's vocation but that of every womanand manis to partner Holy Wisdom in bringing about the reign of mercy and peaceful justice. Relieved of her historic burden as complement to the patriarchal divine and positively signaling the depth of women's dignity vis-á-vis God, Mary becomes free to rejoin us in the communion of saints.

Not the Ideal Feminine

A second difficulty that has distanced Mary from the communion of saints, especially as women experience this today, is the strategy that casts her as the feminine ideal and thus sets her up as the model for all other women. Those who take this approach invariably use a dualistic anthropology that divides male and female into watertight compartments, elevating sex to an ontological principle

that results in virtually two types of human nature. On the one hand, masculine nature equips men for leadership in the public realm because it is marked by intelligence, assertiveness, independence and the ability to make decisions. On the other hand, feminine nature is fit for the private domain of childbearing, homemaking and care for the vulnerable, since it is characterized by relationality, gentleness, nurturing, a non-assertive attitude and the giving of service and reassurance.

The Swiss theologian Hans Urs von Balthasar takes this approach, arguing that in the church there is a Marian principle of holy obedience complementary to the Petrine principle of orderly hierarchical rule. This Marian principle indicates that women ought to divest themselves of self-will in order to be obedient to the word of God as articulated by male spokesmen. A prime example is Mary at Cana. She noticed the lack of wine and, rather than deal with the lack on her own initiative, performed an act of self-emptying by turning to Jesus for help. Balthasar comments, "As a woman she has her heart where it ought to be and not in her brain" (*Mary for Today,* p. 74).

Perhaps the most widely heard proponent of this view is Pope John Paul II. In his letters *Mother of Redemption* and *The Dignity of Women,* he proposes that, like Mary, all women are oriented toward giving love without measure once they have received it. Like Mary, all women are called to be mothers, either physically or spiritually (virgins). Indeed, "women, by looking to Mary, find in her the secret of living their femininity with dignity and of achieving their own true advancement." This entails that in Mary women see mirrored the highest virtues to which they are called, namely, "the self-offering totality of love; the strength that is capable of bearing the greatest sorrows; limitless fidelity and tireless devotion to work; the ability to combine penetrating intuition with words of support and encouragement" (*RM,* No. 46).

Many women's negative reaction to the Marian symbol stems from the realization that this feminine ideal functions as an obstacle to personal growth, preventing the development of a critical intellect, the capacity for righteous anger and other characteristics of a mature personality. The rigid definition of the feminine, when

applied to social roles, also blocks women from functioning in the public order, for by nature they are designed for domestic, auxiliary roles. Living "femininely" can even be dangerous to one's health and life, inculcating passivity in abusive and violent situations. African-American and Hispanic/Latina theologians raise the further criticism that this concept of the feminine is shaped by the privilege of race and class. It is white, middle-class women who can enjoy the qualities of being "feminine," for they have not known the struggle for survival engaged in by generations of slaves or poor immigrants. The 19th-century freed slave Sojourner Truth put her finger on this racist and classist underbelly of the notion of the feminine when she argued:

That man over there says that women need to be helped into carriages and lifted over ditches.... Nobody ever helps me into carriages or over mud puddles, or give me any best place. And ain't I a woman? Look at me! Look at my arms! I have ploughed and planted and gathered into barns, and no man could head me! And ain't I a woman? I could work as much and eat as much as a manwhen I could get itand bear the lash as well. And ain't I a woman? I have borne thirteen children, and seen them most all sold off to slavery and when I cried out with my mother's grief, none but Jesus heard me! And ain't I a woman?

Indeed, what is a woman? And who gets to decide?

An adequate theology of Mary must be clear on this point: There is no eternal feminine; there is no essential feminine nature; there is no ideal woman. In contrast to a dualistic anthropology that so separates head and heart, a liberating view of Mary grows out of an egalitarian anthropology of partnership that respects male-female difference while refusing to stereotype gifts that are freely given. It affirms that sex combines with race, class, ethnicity, sexual orientation, historical, geographical and social location and cultural makeup to define each person as unique. The human race exists in irreducibly pluralistic ways.

Relieved of the burden of being the ideal feminine woman, Mary can be simply herself. A poor woman singing her Magnificat about the downfall of tyrants and full bellies for the hungry, she takes another step toward rejoining us in the

communion of saints. How do we remember her?

A Jewish Village Woman of Faith, a Friend of God and Prophet

The primary source for remembering Mary is the New Testament. Its witness is quite diverse since each Evangelist portrays her in accord with the theological framework of his Gospel. Mark's negative view of Jesus' mother and brothers as *outside* his circle of followers corresponds to the anti-familial ethic of the rest of the Gospel. Matthew's genealogy of the Messiah locates Mary in a line of four other women who take initiative in dubious circumstances outside the patriarchal marriage structure, thereby becoming unexpectedly God's partners in a theology of promise-fulfillment. Luke describes Mary as a woman of faith, overshadowed by the Spirit at Jesus' conception and at the beginning of the church at Pentecost, the first to respond to the glad tidings and to hear the word of God and keep ita pictorial example of his Gospel's theology of discipleship. John's highly stylized portrayal of the mother of Jesus at Cana and at the cross accords with his own vision of the response of discipleship to the Word made flesh, manifest and glorified. As with Gospel portraits of Jesus, these diverse interpretations cannot be harmonized; each is instructive in its own way.

To glimpse the actual woman behind these texts in any kind of full and adequate way is impossible. New studies of the political, economic, social and cultural fabric of first-century Palestine, however, enable us to fill in aspects of her life in broad strokes. Much of this knowledge has resulted from the quest for the historical Jesus, but it serves equally well in a quest for the historical Miriam of Nazareth. Our religious imagination, pondering the Gospel texts, can shape the Marian symbol with concrete historical awareness.

Let us remember our foremother Miriam as a Jewish village woman of faith.

Jewish. As a member of the people of Israel, Mary inherited the faith in one living God stemming from Abraham and Sarah onward, a God who hears the cries of the poor and frees the enslaved into covenanted relationship. Given Jesus' clear knowledge and practice of the Jewish faith, it is reasonable to assume that Mary,

with her husband Joseph, practiced this Jewish religion in their home, following Torah, observing Sabbath and the festivals, reciting prayers, lighting candles and going to synagogue according to custom in Galilee.

Luke depicts Mary in her older years as a member of the early Jerusalem community, praying with 120 women and men disciples before the coming of the Spirit at Pentecost (Acts 1:13-15). One can only imagine the conversations held with Mary Magdalene, first witness of the resurrection, Joanna, Susanna and the other women disciples, as well as others such as Peter, fresh from his betrayal. In light of the death and resurrection of Jesus, this gathering believed that the Messiah had come. In no way did they think this was a cause to leave their religion. Rather, they continued to worship in the Temple and preached the good news to their fellow Jews before finally being persuaded that the Gospel was meant for Gentiles too. To use a term coined in scholarship, Mary was a Jewish Christian who lived before the split between synagogue and church. She was never a Roman-type Christian, not a Gentile at all. It does no honor to bleach her of her Jewishness not only ethnically, by turning her swarthy complexion into blond hair and blue eyes, but religiously, by turning her deeply rooted Jewish piety into that of a latter-day Catholic.

Village woman. This Jewish woman lived in a rural village whose population consisted largely of peasants working the land and craftsmen who served their basic needs. Most women in this setting were unlettered. Married to the local *tekton* (carpenter and stone-worker), her days were taken up with the life-giving, hard, unrecompensed work of women of all ages to feed, clothe and nurture her household. If the brothers and sisters mentioned when the adult Jesus preaches in Nazareth were around in his youth, then this household included her first-born son Jesus, his brothers James, Joses, Judas and Simon, and his sisters (whom Mark leaves unnamed, as typically happens with women); apocryphal gospels explain that these are Joseph's children by a previous marriage. The economic status of this family is a matter of some dispute, with scholars like John Meier placing them in the blue-collar working class, while others, such as John Dominic Crossan, assign them to the peasant class that desperately struggled under the

triple taxation of Temple, Herod and Rome. But make no mistakethe times were tough. This village was part of an occupied state under the heel of imperial Rome; revolutionary resistance made the atmosphere tense; violence and poverty prevailed.

We owe a debt to third world women theologians who have noticed the similarities between Mary's life and the lives of so many poor women even today. Giving birth in a homeless situation; fleeing as a refugee with your baby to a strange land to escape being killed by military action; losing a child to unjust execution by the stateour newspapers yield up these icons of suffering even today. Mary is sister to the marginalized women who live unchronicled lives in oppressive situations. It does her no honor to rip her out of her conflictual, dangerous historical circumstances and transmute her into an icon of a peaceful, middle-class life robed in royal blue.

Woman of faith. This concreteness of her life in a Mediterranean Jewish peasant society provides compelling background for interpreting Miriam of Nazareth as a woman of faith. As depicted in Scripture, she walked by faith, not by sight, asking questions, pondering things in her heart and plunging into the dark night of faith when grief stabbed her to the heart. In those days, the expectation of a messianic king was part of a larger hope for liberation of those suffering from oppressive rule. Luke's infancy narrative gives a particular twist to our memory of Mary's faith by placing her in a key position of partnership with God to bring about this historic promise. The Annunciation scene is nothing less than a prophetic vocation story on the model of the call to Moses at the burning bush. After questioning, she gives her free assent, launching her life on an adventure whose outcome is unknown. Sign of her solidarity with God's project, her very pregnancy takes place through the overshadowing of the Spirit. Despite the misuse of the virginal conception to disparage women's active use of their sexuality, this event actually subverts patriarchy by replacing the usual male participation with *ruah,* the creative Spirit of God. As Sojourner Truth scolded clerics who opposed her speaking in public: "Where your Christ come from, honey? Where your Christ come from? He come from God and a woman. Man

ain't had nothin' to do with it!" The unconventional woman and her child conceived outside the patriarchal family structure begin fulfillment of the divine promise. Nothing is impossible for God.

Mary's faith-filled partnership with God in the work of liberation is underscored in her prayer the Magnificat, the longest set of words placed on the lips of any woman in the whole New Testament, but a prayer oddly omitted from traditional Mariology. She is in the embrace of her cousin Elizabeth; Zechariah has been struck dumb; the house is now women's space, and they fill it with a prophetic language of faith. The old pregnant woman calls the young one "blessed among women," repeating praise given in Jewish scriptures to Jael and to Judith after their heroic action to liberate God's people. Then, in the line of the great biblical singers Miriam, Moses, Deborah and Hannah, Mary launches into divine praise. Her spirit rejoices in God her Savior, for poor and common woman though she may be, the powerful, living, holy God is doing great things to her. Not to her only but to all the poorbringing the mighty down from their thrones, exalting the lowly, filling the hungry with good things, sending the unrepentant rich away emptyall of this in fulfillment of the ancient promise. In her very being this is happening, for she embodies the nonentities on whom God is lavishing rescue. This great prayer, a revolutionary song of salvation, places Mary in solidarity with the project of the coming reign of God whose intent is to heal, redeem and liberate. It does her no honor to reduce her faith to a privatized piety or a simple mother-son relationship focused exclusively on Jesus.

Space does not permit further development here of the memory of Mary as a Jewish village woman of faith, but we can begin to see the potential latent in other Gospel scenes. As is true of every person, she has her own individual history. She stands forth in the memory of the community for "the way in which in her own particular life she fully and responsibly accepted the will of God, because she heard the word of God and acted upon it, and because charity and a spirit of service were the driving force of her actions" (Paul VI, *Marialis Cultus,* No. 35). It is precisely as a poor woman, one of those on the underside of history, that she

had faith. The later doctrines of the church that gift her with extraordinary blessings receive subversive meaning when linked with this memory, the status as "non-person" of the one to whom God has done great things.

We began by asking what would be a theologically sound, spiritually empowering and ethically challenging view of Mary, mother of Jesus the Christ, for the 21st century. Our answer leads along the path of remembrance in the communion of saints. To relate to Miriam of Nazareth as a partner in hope in the company of all the graced women and men who have gone before us; to be encouraged by her mothering of God to bring God to birth in our own world; to reclaim the power of her dangerous memory for the flourishing of suffering people; and to draw on the energy of her memory for a deeper relationship with the living God and stronger care for the worldthis theological approach fits at least one pattern of contemporary spirituality. When the Christian community remembers like this, Mary the friend of God and prophet inspires the lives of women and men alike.

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