

PASTORAL PERSPECTIVE

By Bishop Joseph L. Hogan

Who Is This 'New Woman' Among Us?

As I see the women of today struggling to shape new roles for themselves out of the questions and challenges of our day, I am struck by the thought that Mary, the Mother of God, has much to say to today's "new women" because she herself had to be "new" in her own time.



Looking at today's world, I see, on the one hand, feature articles describing the joys of natural childbirth. I see one woman traveling around the world speaking in the name of peace in northern Ireland and decrying war as an answer to human conflicts; and another, dressed in military uniform, working with our own armed forces, dedicated to the premise that war will always be inevitable. In the business world, women are competing with men for equal job opportunities and equal pay; and in our inner city, plans are being laid for a shelter for women "battered" by their spouses.

What light does the experience of the most celebrated woman of Christendom shed on all of this? What was Mary really like as a human being? When you sift through the legendary image projected by the profusion of literature, art and music created in her honor, it is difficult to discover her true characteristics. How would she act in the confusion of these changing times? Would she take a leadership role in today's world? Would she become involved in the Women's Movement?

Scripture scholars and theologians tell us that the scanty references to Mary in the gospels need to be understood in the light of the history and culture of those times. To piece together Mary's true story is a difficult task for us to accomplish since we are formed with an entirely different world view. Much of what we can glean about her is more conjecture than established fact. However, a few significant insights stand out clearly.

First of all, she was a woman of strong faith who took her God very seriously. She had to come to know him in a totally new way. No woman, before her or since, has been selected to be the Mother of God. She had no job description, or handbook, or catechism to tell her the "right" way. She had the Scriptures, and with her, there was always her deep relationship of faith with Yahweh, the God of her people.

We do know that our Lady's people had a long history of political turmoil as pawns of more powerful nations. In her own time they were oppressed under the domination of the Roman Empire. So the angel's word to Mary, that she was called to give birth to the "Son of the Most High," who would "be King over Israel forever," must have filled her with wonder. In fact, the Gospel tells us she was "deeply troubled." But she was well aware, from her Old Testament



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meditation, of Yahweh's "mercy from generation to generation toward those who fear him," and she was very conscious that he had "put down the mighty from their thrones and lifted up the lowly." Whatever Mary's vision of the Kingdom of Israel had been, and whatever impression she had of the kind of Messiah that Yahweh would send her people, she knew that He would somehow guide her in her tasks. He had guided those before her through the desert, overshadowing them with His power. Her deeply intimate personal knowledge of her God, in faith, gave her the courage to say "Yes" to this uniquely new calling.

Another important insight for today's people is the quality of Mary's relationships with those she loved. We can only imagine the kind of awareness she had of the Child she carried within her womb, and the kind of prayer that grew out of her tender concern for Him. Her response to the elderly Elizabeth, which took her on a journey difficult for anyone, especially for one pregnant, certainly shows her own sense of service. It seems to me the mighty song of her Magnificat in Elizabeth's presence is a testimony of her whole attitude of joy, of humility, and of gratitude that motivated her and bade her to be for others what the Lord had been for her. "From this day forth, all generations will count me blessed, so wonderfully has he dealt with me...he has not forgotten to show mercy to...his children's children, forever." How great must have been that conversation shared between Mary

and Elizabeth since their bond of faith and their awareness of Yahweh's power and blessings in their lives was so vibrant and strong. What kind of conversation would we have in our families and parishes if this kind of awareness was prompting us?

Then, as Mary's child grew to manhood, we see that she related to him both as teacher and as one being taught. The single incident in Scripture regarding the young boy's sojourn in the temple when He was twelve, "sitting surrounded by the teachers, listening to them and putting questions," gives us a small indication of Mary's challenge as a parent. As much as she revered him and willingly learned from Him, she also had to call Him to responsibility as she did when she reproached Him, "Son, why have you treated us like this? Your father and I have been searching for you in great anxiety." This, it seems to me, involves dialogue of the first quality — an excellent model for Marriage Encounter and Team Ministry.

During the years of Jesus' public ministry, we see only glimpses of Mary. Surely she must have watched His activities and listened to His message. Whether she actually was with him in his traveling, we do not know. Even the reports of His many signs and wonders, of His challenging teaching, and of the response of the people, would have been enough to indicate to her the quality of His mission. And when it came to the end, we know that she stood beside Him.

Perhaps the strongest witness that Mary gives us men and women of today is her attitude regarding Jesus' death. It is the fruit and the full flowering of the faith and loving concern for her people that enabled her to stand at the cross, when the other disciples, except one, had fled, and when no defense or no reproach was left to her silent standing there before the gaze of everyone who could see. It is there that the Scriptures tell us, Jesus gave the disciple, John, to her as a son, and gave her to the disciple as a mother. It was there, in the midst of her suffering, when the confusion and unknowing were at their height, that she became, symbolically, identified most closely with us. She understands, not only the terrible loss of death but the sense of humiliation surrounding the cruel execution of her son. She shows us, in the days following Jesus' ascension, the same steadfast faithfulness, remaining with the fearful apostles in the upper room, waiting and praying for the coming of the Spirit.

Surely, we find in her life many signs that this woman was equal to the task of her life — that her stature is equal to the task of any age. Her faith, her concern for others, her strength of purpose, her tremendous compassion and loyalty to Jesus and His people, whom she made her own, were a new kind of greatness in her own times. As each of us attempts, in a spirit of obedience to the same God, to meet the challenges of life today, we have access to the same new life which nourished hers — the life of the new creation which is poured out on us by the Spirit of Pentecost.

Unity Marks The Church

During the general audience on July 27, Pope Paul VI delivered the following address.

What shall we speak to you about in this short moment of conversation? About the Church of course! A visit to Rome, like your visit as pilgrims, a visit as strangers, certainly arouses in your spirit a spontaneous curiosity, that of forming a new idea, a clearer one than you already possess, of this great, mysterious institution which is the Church. Here, where the Church has her center, where you meet the Pope, the Head of the Church, you think you can have a direct, more complete, most exact and more memorable knowledge of the Church herself. You are quite right. We suggest that during your stay in Rome you repeat in your heart the words of the "Credo," so often repeated at Sunday Mass: "I believe..." This expression takes on, in this place, in this circumstance, a particular earnestness: "I believe in the Church one, holy, catholic and apostolic."

Treasure these words. They are words of life. They seem to answer a very simple, but quite difficult question. What is the Church? It is, certainly not

enough to answer that the Church is the sacred building where one goes to pray. You will hear the most strange and arbitrary definitions of the Church, nearly always incomplete and biased, sometimes even offensive. You are all, we think, baptized; so you belong to the Church. Well, what is the Church? The Second Vatican Council, celebrated a few years ago, gave various rather descriptive definitions, which show the riches, the depth, the beauty of this word "Church." Teachers of religion, bishops, theologians and other scholars have said profound and stupendous things about it, which it is not easy to repeat and summarize.

It has been said, for example, that the Church is God's plan for mankind; it is the kingdom of God in the world; the work of God; the building that God constructs in history; it is the People of God; it is God's Covenant with men; it is the Mystical Body of Christ... These are great ideas, immense ideas which have this particular feature, that because they are divine and universal ideas, they concern us also personally, they touch our destiny. We cannot disregard the concept of the Church to define in some way our very being, our life, our fate. We are the Church. This is, we are "called"; Ecclesia means convocation, it means a call, it means a gathering of people; it means mankind gathered, by the voice and by the grace of God, for Christ, in the Holy Spirit.

The first divine intention that enlivens the Church is

therefore that of community, or rather that of unity: a compact and organic community, in fact, like a well-constructed building. Remember Jesus' ideal: "I will build my Church." Remember how Christ himself proclaimed it in his last words, those of the ineffable prayer, after the Supper, in the night preceding his passion: "that they may be one." Here there is a mystery. Jesus himself makes us understand this when he declares that this unity, characteristic of the followers of Christ, springs from the very unity of the Son with the Father, and that therefore it cannot be fathomed by our thought. We must proclaim it and live it but we cannot comprehend it. We must "believe it."

In fact those specific prerogatives of the Church, "one, holy, catholic and apostolic", which we mentioned, can be twofold, they can take on two meanings. One is that of properties characteristic of the Church, that is, ways of being, qualities inherent in the nature of the Church. In this sense they are mysterious truths which only faith can grasp, meditate and celebrate. The other meaning, on the contrary, is that derived from their exterior manifestation, and from this standpoint those blessed words become, as is said, "marks", that is, signs, knowable on the human plane. They document, to anyone who knows how to observe them well, the miraculous splendour of the Church which is, we repeat, one, holy, apostolic and catholic.

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