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MARY OUR MOTHER AND MODEL

7. The preeminent model for men and women from the beginning of Christianity, most especially in the Catholic Church, is Mary, the Mother of Jesus. It is no coincidence that the Fathers of Vatican Council II included a chapter on Mary in the Constitution on the Church, for she is both the traditional symbol of the Church and the best model of true discipleship.

Devotion to the Mother of God as a special model for Christian women has undergone many changes through the centuries, and seems even more vital now that women's role in the Church has come under new and enlightened scrutiny.

8. In the Gospels of Luke and John, Mary is seen primarily as an example of the perfect disciple of Jesus, the one who "hears the word of God and keeps it" (Luke 8:21). Her role at the beginning and end of Jesus' life is one of acceptance and obedience to the will of God in perplexing and painful circumstances.

9. In the Constantinian period Mary became the model of women who withdrew from the world to a solitary life of prayer and fasting. The middle ages found her a model of purity and fidelity in love. During the Renaissance Mary was revered especially as a tender mother, caring for her spiritual children. In our own century we have emphasized Mary as the heart of the Holy Family, the symbol of family unity.

10. Most recently, the Fathers of Vatican Council II described Mary as "a model of the Church in the matter of faith, charity and perfect union with Christ," and as the Church's "excellent exemplar in faith and charity."⁵

11. Each of these is a true facet of Mary, as a model for women, but each in itself is incomplete. It may be that the Gospel image of perfect discipleship brings us closest to a view of Mary that can serve as a model for women today.

The Mary we see in the Scriptures is a woman of deep faith and courage, of clear-eyed acceptance of God's will. She is the strong and mature believer who achieves a balance between the tensions of humble obedience⁶ and forthright questioning,⁷ of contemplation and action. She is, in fact, the preeminent role model of a mother or father in that her example made real for her son the meaning of openness to the will of his Father.

Mary had a prominent place in the public life of Jesus from Cana to the cross and was, according to tradition, the guiding force of the new Church from the Pentecost event until her assumption.

Her life was full of contradictions. She obeyed the orders of a repressive Roman government in her journey to Bethlehem, but defied custom by standing at the foot of the cross. Mary accepted in faith that her blessedness lay, not simply in having borne the Son of God, but in hearing God's word and keeping it. She accepted her son's seeming indifference to her frantic search when she found him in the temple, but urged that he use his power at Cana, even though his hour had not yet come; she accepted the mystery of the Incarnation in complete faith and was willing to let him go with the same faith, accepting the mystery of her new vocation to become the Mother of the Church.

12. Mary is not a woman protected from the demands of faith in daily living. There is nothing vapid or sentimental about her. She is a woman with her feet planted firmly on the earth, Mary of Nazareth, the new Eve, the new Mother of all the living, the woman whose risk in faith first made Christ present among us.

13. It is precisely in this way that Mary is the first model for the contemporary woman — not as a mysterious icon or an object of obscure veneration and unattainable blessedness, but as an altogether human woman who was painfully misunderstood by the man she loved; who was confused by her child's behavior; who was not afraid to speak her mind or voice her questions; who stood by courageously while her son was executed; who was present at the outpouring of the Holy Spirit on the new Church; and who, indeed, had a role of leadership in that Church.

God's presence in her life was the source of her strength in the face of frightening change and danger. Her fidelity to the Spirit working in her makes her the perfect disciple and the best example of human response to God's action among us.

When Mary's place in the life and continued ministry of the Church is recognized and understood, the place of all women in the Church is assured — not as onlookers or maid servants, but as integral co-workers, as necessary for the incarnation of Christ in our world as Mary was to the first Incarnation.

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WOMEN: THEIR HISTORY IN THE CHURCH

14. The coming of Jesus meant a new day and Good News for all men and women. The people who walked in darkness now saw a great light. Though Jesus was a man of his time in many respects, his justice and love revealed a new covenant with women, as well as men:

According to the Gospels, Christ showed an enlightened attitude towards women: in His conversation with the Samaritan woman at the well, in His friendship with Martha and Mary, especially in His defense of Mary's preference to listen to His words, rather than to wait upon Him; in His behavior towards the Syrophenician woman with the sick daughter; and in His appearance as Risen Lord to Mary Magdalene, whom He sends to announce the Good News to His Apostles. These incidents, interpreted in their cultural context, give a basis for a genuine emancipation and liberation of womanhood.⁸

15. This biblical perspective can be a source of freedom and clarity for us. We have all been created by a loving God; we spring from the love of God and are destined to become one in the fullness of his love. For this we need the life-giving power of Jesus Christ in whom "there is neither Jew nor Greek, there is neither slave nor free, there is neither male nor female; for all are one in Christ Jesus" (Galatians 3:28).

16. The women represented in the Gospels approached Jesus with faith. This is in stark contrast to some of their male counterparts and to the generally submissive role of women in Jesus' day. Jesus always rewarded their faith and offered them to us as examples of discipleship.