

M A R Y | *St. Mary's North Melbourne* | *August 16, 2015*

*Praise to our God who blesses us before we ask,
persistently leads us into new life,
and joyfully pursues us, morning and evening, day by day.
May God be with you.¹*

—

MARY, as Jaroslav Pelikan has pointed out, “has been the subject of more thought and discussion about what it means to be a woman than any other woman”—and this must be true, at least in western cultures. It is commonplace—and important—to recognize next that much of this thought and discussion is the work of male theologians. Indeed, it is significant to note that Mary herself is “recorded” or remembered as saying almost nothing. And though complex and sometimes extremely unwieldy thinking has developed across many cultures about her, marian theology—at least in its official forms—remains largely the work of men. Unsurprisingly, then, it all-too-easily reflects what may be little more than male assumptions about what being female means, and merrily reinscribes many patriarchal patterns of thinking. To compound all this, Mary has come to be used to promote some extremely conservative—and to my mind, unappealing and unconvincing—models of faith and discipleship, and these might afflict men as well as women. It is no wonder, then, that Mary has been such a large focus of feminist theology in our times.

One of my friends, Nicola Slee, herself a feminist theologian, has written a poem about her own difficulties approaching Mary because of what the Christian tradition has laid upon Mary, stifling her with expectations and strange ideas. It’s a brilliant catalogue of what there is to contend with:

It didn’t take the Fathers long to separate you from us.
They stripped you of your sexuality,
draped you with thick, heavy garments
so we couldn’t see the shape of your body,
couldn’t imagine you running,
sweating, menstruating.
They gave you a young European girl’s face,
smoothed out the Palestinian earthiness of your features.
They knocked Joseph off as soon as they could,

¹ This invocation is slightly adapted from my esteemed colleague Fredrica Harris Thompsett: www.eds.edu/news/friendship-and-joy

and Jesus' brothers and sisters were blanked out of the family photographs.
They arrayed you with the costliest jewels,
fastened your feet in tight shoes,
perfumed your flesh with roses.
They hastened you away
 into a holy corner,
 up on a tall pedestal,
 behind a grille,
out of sight of the dusty streets,
protected from the sounds and smells of the poor
who had to come searching for you,
now estranged from their conditions.

Even the Trinity didn't want you, whatever Jung advised.
Jesus crowned you Queen of heaven
but left you suspended somewhere in the clouds,
belonging neither below nor above.
The Father and the Spirit looked on, unperturbed.
Angels flapped around but didn't talk to you,
unsure whether to worship.

I might have reached up to you,
tried to pull you down,
charged into the church and crashed through the sanctuary barrier,
toppled you off your airy pedestal.
Only the clerics kept me away,
the catholics with their incense and rosaries,
the protestants with their cries of "Heresy!" and "Papacy!"

Nobody told me you were my sister,
that you needed me.
Nobody told me how I might have need of you.²

The title of the poem, "Alone of All Her Sex," echoes the title of Marina Warner's feminist classic from the 1970s, on "the myth and cult" of Mary. And the line towards the end—"nobody told me that you were my sister"—points to the work of contemporary feminist theologians, most notably Elizabeth Johnson's brilliant book of 2003, *Truly Our*

² Nicola Slee, *The Book of Mary* (London: SPCK, 2007), pp. 28-9. The whole book is helpful for sifting and rethinking the marian tradition.

Sister,³ in which Johnson tries to recover a sense of what the life of the mother of Jesus might actually have been like, which amongst other things meant that, unlike modern feminist, Mary “hardly had a room of her own.”

“NOBODY told me that you were my sister.” This is, I find, a very important fragment of a contemporary marian spirituality—at least it is of my own. It provides for me the clue as to why it is so important to give attention to Mary. Because: unchecked and unexamined, a great deal of Christian theology—not just mariology—runs the risk of not allowing people to be seen in love for what they are, subject to a lot of talk in which they might barely recognise themselves. Christian theology can far too often—as it does with Mary: her virgin-motherhood, sinlessness, silence, just for starters—wrap all kinds of contradictory ideas, double-binds, and problems around people.

For example, I think that we need to be told much more unambiguously than is often the case in Christian circles: that lesbian women are our sisters; that gay men are our brothers; that ones from cultures other than our own, from another faith maybe, are our sisters and brothers too. You know how to make this list! And together we could make a very long list of those who are “othered” by aspects of the Christian tradition, at least when held it is held in narrow minds.

We need Mary to help us to discern, *because of what has happened to her in Christian tradition*, where Christian theology goes wrong by not always allowing people to speak for themselves, and by overloading human persons with sometimes the strangest of expectations. And when we see the oddness if not the downright damage done to dehumanize persons in the marian tradition, we then need Mary our sister’s help to discern where the dynamics of dehumanization are at work in other Christian doctrines, in biblical interpretation, in church teaching—any of it that:

- separates people from one another;
- strips people of their sexuality;
- denies the human body;
- over-rides ethnicities and cultures;
- distances people from relationships of love and responsibility;
- accommodates people to oppression;
- silences and denies voice to people who can speak for themselves.

The tradition “tells” us a lot about Mary. But not always that she is our sister. The tradition tells us a lot about those who may be different from ourselves—or indeed, may be us—but not always that we are sisters and brothers, at home in the Christian “family.”

³ Elizabeth Johnson, csj, *Truly Our Sister: A Theology of Mary in the Communion of Saints* (London: Continuum, 2003).

So for me, a contemporary marian spirituality must begin with her sisterhood. And for me, that is not an end itself, but rather a beginning to reframing the tradition in stretching directions. Here's another poem, this time by Alla Renee Bozarth, one of the women-priests illegally or irregularly ordained in 1974 in the Episcopal Church of the USA, the so-called "Philadelphia 11." Bozarth's poem is called "*Maria Sacerdota—Proto-priest of the New Covenant.*" It is about the best clue I know as to why we might praise Mary:

Before Jesus was his mother.
Before supper in the upper room, breakfast in the barn.
Before the Passover Feast, a feeding trough.
And here, the altar of Earth, fair linens of hay and seed.
Before his cry, her cry.
Before his sweat of blood, her bleeding and tears.
Before his offering, hers.
Before the breaking of bread and death, the breaking of her body in birth.
Before the offering of the cup, the offering of her breast.
Before his blood, her blood.
And by her body and blood alone,
his body and blood and whole human being.

The wise ones knelt to hear the woman's word in wonder.
Holding up her sacred child, her spark of God in the form of a babe,
she said: "Receive and let your hearts be healed
and your lives be filled with love,
for
This is my body,
This is my blood."⁴

—

Stephen Burns

⁴ www.homepages.iol.ie/~duacon/1950501.htm I first came across a fragment of this poem in Ann Loades, "The Nativity in Recent Poetry," Jeremy Corley, ed., *New Perspectives on the Nativity* (London: T & T Clark, 2009), pp. 148-164. Interestingly, the notes to the chapter reveal that the poem was commended to her by bishop Martin Warner, whose position on the ordination of women has not been unambiguous.