

# FEEDBACK

## A MAY MEDITATION ON OUR LADY: Radical Feminism And Conservative Mariolatry

Since the Counter-Reformation the month of May has in Roman Catholic circles been dedicated to the Blessed Virgin Mary, the Mother of God and Queen of the Universe. In the nonsense wake of Vatican II, however, many Catholics have felt vaguely uneasy and embarrassed about Sweet Mary Model of Purity, with her flawless complexion, pink and blue wardrobe, and heavenward gaze.

Current attempts at "relevance" give an active rather than passive character to Mary's humility and obedience, hoping to make up for all the centuries when she was presented as a yes-woman, and it is now fashionable to stress the just-plain-folks ordinariness of Mary and not distinguish her from the rest of the poor of Yahweh. Many people find this new emphasis fresh and meaningful, but the old image of the Immaculate Queen of Heaven had far more substance to it than mere plaster statues and novenas. Let me even suggest what at first may seem an unlikely connection between the pre-Vatican II Our Lady of the Holy Cards and the radical feminism that has arisen in secular circles.

The higher criticism of contemporary biblical scholars focuses on the underlying message rather than the culturally determined details of its presentation. The same approach has also been used on the rule and constitutions of religious communities and on conservative Vatican directives, as liberal

theologians search out progressive hints between the lines. Why can there not be a similar hermeneutics of popular devotions, of that mythological and non-intellectual level of Holy Faith expressed by May crownings and brown scapulars? The old forms should be reinterpreted and turned back into the poetry of faith that they were meant to be, in the process casting light even on contemporary radical feminism. The new understandings would not be dogmatic formulae stiflingly and idolatrously imposed word-for-word, but more profound and so only tentatively verbalizable, more modest in their claim to absolute truth, more able to co-exist side by side with other interpretations without involving the old right-wrong dichotomy. The living reality, in its multitude of contradictory facets, becomes more important than any single formulation.

For the past half-century modern theologians have been busily cleaning up the Jesus image to remove all conflict with secular political or philosophical frameworks. Even feminists can play this game, despite the unavoidable anomaly of a male savior; among the first was Leonard Swidler (see his "Jesus Was a Feminist," *Catholic World*, January 1971, pp. 177-183). Mary, however, does not require such a revisionist approach.

According to traditional theology, the Savior was necessitated by the Fall of Adam. Had Eve alone eaten the ap-

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ple, there would have been no problem; even when it comes to sin, only the male counts. Is it possible that under this discriminatory system women have not been in need of redemption in exactly the same way as men? Mary Daly suggests that while the sin of men is the traditional one of pride, that of women has been excessive humility. The dogma of the Immaculate Conception, Mary's preservation from original sin from the first moment of her existence, might be an unconscious intuition of some such distinction.

There used to be considerable defensiveness about Mary's attitude to sex. After all, the Virgin of Virgins who told nine-year-old Aloysius Gonzaga that the best way to honor her was to abstain sexually sounds unfashionably repressed. But there are present-day feminists who are celibate for the sake of their apostolate, as well as non-celibate lesbians relating only to other women, sometimes with a separatism that approaches minor papal enclosure. And Mary's unprecedented though legendary choice of virginity and service in the Temple instead of the usual marriage and service in the home (the original nun, a fantasy from Luke 1:34 and the apocryphal gospels) is the first Christian assertion that woman's position in life is not necessarily limited to the traditional role of wife of one man and, if so blessed, mother of a few more men. Even the Church Fathers were willing to agree, though only in the context of a life of consecrated virginity for women, who would then leave off being Eve-like temptresses of vulnerable men.

Mary's "privilege" of all the joys of motherhood (childbirth and childcare) with none of the disadvantages (sex) may not sound like much fun, yet it is not much different from radical feminist dreams of the Amazons and parthenogenesis by cloning. Sojourner

Truth explained the feminist significance of the Virgin Birth: "Where did your Christ come from? From God and a woman! Man had nothing to do with him."

It's worth remembering that Mary was an unwed mother in the eyes of everyone, including sexist Joseph, who apparently never thought of keeping her around until the angel told him to. As "putative father" Joseph hardly counted in the cosmic scheme; in the Middle Ages he was portrayed as a gnarled old fool attending to the needs of the beautiful fairy princess, and devotion to him did not really become popular until the secular eighteenth century began to threaten Church and home.

Mary's virginity need not necessarily be taken as anti-sex (or anti-heterosexual, for that matter). For myriads of celibate men, Mary has functioned as the great sex object in the sky, and her title of Spouse of the Holy Spirit is erotic, as are the selections from the Song of Solomon for her feasts. There is also the liberal Protestant view of Jesus as Joseph's child, giving Mary a more active sexuality; and some will recall the old accusation that Jesus was a bastard, the son of a Roman soldier whose name was later garbled to make Mary *parthene*, "virgin."

In contrast to the century-old policy of automatic excommunication for abortion and the frequent denunciations of contraception, let us recall that Mary had more control over her reproductive life than any other woman in history. Gabriel made her an offer, and had she said no. . . . The Annunciation on March 25 should be a feminist patronal feast, just as December 28, the feast of the Holy Innocents, has been for the far right of the anti-abortion movement.

Like other Jewish women, Mary was considered ritually unclean after



childbirth and in need of purification, even though theologians later decided that the Virgin Birth had exempted her. (At any rate, her ritual compliance gave us a nice procession at Candlemas.) Her blood at the Incarnation became the blood of Jesus, the Precious Blood shed later in the Passion and present now in the Blessed Sacrament. The shedding, transubstantiating, and drinking of this blood seemed folly to the Gentiles, but the monthly flowing of her blood was equally a scandal to the Jews with their elaborate regulations about the menstruous woman. It also incidentally provided a valuable opportunity for relics made scarce by her bodily Assumption; "a dirty linen of the Holy Virgin, having her flowers" was reported in the Auvergne and in Catalonia, among other places.

Mary may have been the first woman priest, if not the first priest of any sex. She was the first to make the Body and Blood present, at the Incarnation; more truly than any subsequent priest, she could say, "This is my body." If the Last Supper (with the first ordinations) was a Passover Seder, traditionally a family affair, she had more right to be there than any of the twelve apostles. On Calvary she offered the bloody sacrifice which the Holy Sacrifice of the Mass was to perpetuate. Twice, in the fifteenth and nineteenth centuries, her depiction in priestly vestments was suppressed by the hierarchy. Her titles of Co-Mediator and Co-Redeemer have never been officially either affirmed or rejected.

There is also another side to Mary as the holy incubator, bringing forth the God-Man, dutifully tending to his every need, unpossessively sending him on his way when the time came, and throughout it all kneeling in humble adoration to her offspring who, having invented the Ten Command-

ments, was perfectly willing to play at honoring his mother even though they both knew their roles were inverted. Mary is not only the Mother of Christ, of the human nature, of the historical Jesus, but also the Mother of God, of the full divinity; her flesh alone goes into the incarnate flesh of the Nativity and Crucifixion and Resurrection and Eucharist. She is like Uranos and Kronos primordial before Zeus (cf. Eccclus. 24:14, read on her feasts), the Birth-Giver of God, as it were creating the Creator (*Mater Creatoris* in the Litany of Loreto). Yes, those Protestant accusations of Mary-worship, which Catholics always so vehemently denied with their jesuitical distinctions between latria and hyperdulia, were really true! Perhaps the distinction between the Mother of God and the Mother-God is a piece of sophistry, or simply a proper matter for theological exploration, as the relation between Jesus and God the Father has been.

Her unhistoricity makes her less suitable as an ethical and philosophical leader than Jesus, whose words and deeds are recorded, but this can also be an advantage: we need not be confined by the mold of the God of history—who, after all, is known by the telling title of God of Abraham and Isaac and Jacob. In this matter Catholics have a distinct advantage over Protestants, who are tied to a sexist Bible in which Mary and other women barely appear; non-scriptural church tradition is a bit more open to female influences, and via natural law even heathen Hottentots and secular feminists can use their God-given faculties to arrive at some eternal truths. The official policy-making and doctrine-defining structure of the Church has always been male; far more relevant for women may be the popular devotions which spring spontaneously from the hearts of the predominantly female faithful.

Such pious practices tend to be more Marian in orientation than are either Scripture or dogma; Jesus seems not to have inspired these devotions in a number proportionate to his theological rank.

In contrast, there is the antiseptic intellectual approach of Protestantism, which is revolted by the bad taste of, say, a Mother of Sorrows with seven swords stuck in her quivering pink heart, or by the sentimental extravagances of St. Alphonsus Liguori's *Glories of Mary*, or by Rome's obsession with the state of Mary's hymen at various stages of her life. Indeed, in our ecumenical age this queasiness even seems to be rubbing off on us papists, as we sanitize her into acceptability as the Woman of Faith, the first believer, the loyal follower of Jesus. A modern litany in the May 1975 *Monthly Missalette*, composed from the bishops' 1973 pastoral letter *Behold Your Mother*, closes with such heavy-handed titles as "Virgin most liberated," "Woman most free," and "Mother most fulfilled!"

Female objects of devotion were firmly rejected, both by Judaism in reaction to Canaanite fertility cults and by the Reformation in opposition to Catholic veneration of Mary; today even Catholics seem eager to avoid such indications of "excess." This neo-Protestantism is more overtly anti-woman than were the old Baltimore Catechism days, when we had not only

Our Lady, but also the Little Flower and St. Philomena and hundreds more. Now all we hear about is Jesus our brother, who leads us to the Father and into full Christian manhood with him. There is no female presence any more in worship or theology, and God knows there never was in the power structure. Yet Jung emphasized the danger in repressing the female element, whether within ourselves or in our perception of external reality, and he saw the definition of the dogma of the Assumption as a recognition of the androgynous nature of the Godhead, with a male Father and Son and a female Spirit and Mary.

Perhaps we should abandon our attempts at demythologization and our search for the historical Mary, and listen more carefully to the Mary who speaks to the heart. Despite what some may have begun to fear, the purpose of this discourse has not been to turn *Cross Currents* readers into fervent members of the Blue Army. Rather it has been to provide an alternative, positive appraisal of the traditional and largely defunct devotion to Our Lady, so that it need not be entirely and irreplaceably abandoned; to redeem it from the pollution of sexism, misogyny, double standard, and middle-class morality; to restore to it the newness of *metanoia*. . . .

Mary Queen of Feminists, pray for us.

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## THE POLITICS OF IMAGINATION: Playful Theologies as Theologies of Liberation

Recently I have been intrigued with the question of why theologies of play or imagination have surfaced in the midst of, even though seemingly over against, theologies of liberation. The explosion of playful theologies on the current scene is hardly an accident or

sheer coincidence.<sup>1</sup> Forms of theological expression and reflection grow out of a felt need, i.e. they surface in response to and as a reflection of a particular situation. What seems increasingly evident is that the playful theologies are liberating theologies for

