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MARY, EMBODIMENT OF GOD'S LOVE:
A Historical Perspective

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History has no record of Mary or Miriam of Nazareth except through the documents of faith, and the account of her in these documents is brief. Paul does not even mention her name. Luke and Matthew mention her, mostly in the Infancy narratives. The fourth Gospel gives her prominence. The *Didache* does not mention her either.[1]

Mary was not a rabbi and she did not write a book of scripture, but her theological voice has given the Church its most sung hymn of praise and thanksgiving. The contrast between the little biblical evidence about her and the persistent interest in her two thousand years after her death is striking. From meager biblical evidence has grown a complex and sometimes extravagant history of Marian devotion in the Church. The symbolic truth that the Marian tradition reveals about God, ourselves and the Church far exceeds the limited historical information available. Mary is honored in paintings and poetry, hymns and devotions, cathedrals and churches, religious orders and elaborate feasts. She has inspired some of the loftiest architecture, some of

[1]These details were presented at greater length in my previous article, published in this same issue of *Landas*.

the most moving poetry and some of the most beautiful paintings in the world; she has stirred men and women to the noblest emotions of love and awe.[2] And every age has unconsciously formed its image of her according to its own ideal of holiness and discipleship. That image, largely shaped by the imaginations of many generations of Christians, has adapted itself to the religious needs of the faithful. While there is strong evidence that Mary is still a religious symbol of enduring power in the Catholic tradition, she remains an ambiguous one, especially for women, for the passive docility has been projected on to her. Statues often present her as deferential and demure, submissive and timid, with eyes downcast and resigned expression; traditional theology has presented a sort of "dehydrated Mary." She needs to be liberated from some of the images into which she has been formed. How can one distinguish the Mary of the Gospels from the Mary of some popular devotions? This piece focuses on the devotions of generations of Christians as they largely shaped their own image of Mary as she embodied God's love. She has been the Church's model in re-embodying the love of God in various times and cultures and the Church has constantly turned to her to meet the ever-changing aspects of Christian discipleship.

Because times and cultures vary, the demands of the radical living of the Gospel also vary and can never be rigidly prescribed. There has always been a strong mutual influence between prayer and belief, and the development of popular piety reflected the people's traditional belief in Mary's powerful intercession. While the beginnings of the Marian cult are obscure, devotion to Mary from earliest times found expression within the liturgy. A prayer of petition to her, *Sub Tuum Praesidium* ("Under your protection O Holy Mother of God..."), is attested from the late third or fourth century.[3] This prayer, which was

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[2]Marina Warner, *Alone of All Her Sex: The Myth and the Cult of the Virgin Mary.* (London: George Weidenfeld & Nicolson, 1983), 338.

[3]Hilda Graef, *Mary: A History of Doctrine and Devotion Vol. I.* (New York: Hawthorn Books, 1963), 48.

adopted into the Byzantine, Coptic, Ethiopian and Latin Churches, shows the early development of belief in Mary's power of intercession being expressed in prayer.

In the Constantinian period, when the Christian religion was officially tolerated and was subsequently adopted as the official state religion, the threat of martyrdom had passed and the ideal of carrying one's cross found expression in asceticism. Mary, Queen of Virgins, became the patroness of ascetics and celibates. She was the model of women withdrawing to the Egyptian desert to lead a hermetic life.[4] Documents from this period describe her as a perfect Egyptian nun, eating and sleeping only when her body demanded it. She avoided her relatives and other women who spoke of the things of this world, and made progress every day. She was perceived as a solitary, consorting only with angels and leading the life of the most exemplary austerity.

During the fourth century, there was an upsurge in popular devotion to Mary. She also became the ideal of the consecrated virgin who stayed at home and prayed (by contrast, the Mary of the Gospels did not hesitate to visit her cousin Elizabeth and attend the Temple feasts). Since the fourth century, Marian hymns have been sung and churches have been named after her. In the fifth century, the Church Fathers spoke of Mary as taking a vow of virginity. Gradually the practice of taking a formal vow became an established custom in the Church. It then seemed only fitting that she, the prototype of virgins, would have been the first to make such a promise to God. The imitation of Mary became an established way of life. A widening split between the Fathers' views of an idealized Mary and other women lies at the root of the representation of Mary in Western art, where she is never portrayed as a sexual being. She is fully clothed while Eve, on the other hand, is frequently portrayed as naked. Such images leave lasting impressions on fertile imaginations.

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[4]Graef, *Mary: A History of Doctrine and Devotion Vol. I*, 50-55.

Marian Devotion after Ephesus

It is probably safe to say that the real impetus for the Marian cult began when the Council of Ephesus in 431 defined Mary's unique role as the *Theotokos,* the Godbearer, the one who gives birth to the one who is God. To call Mary God-bearer is to assert that she is the intimate source of the human identity of God himself, giving to God incarnate all that a mother gives to her children—blood, bone, nerve and personality. In her conceiving and child-bearing, heaven and earth were wedded beyond any possibility of divorce; a stupendous miracle has occurred which raised human nature to heaven itself.[5]

It was also at Ephesus that Cyril of Alexandria presented before the Fathers of the Council what some regard as the greatest Marian sermon in the whole of antiquity. After Ephesus, the divine Mother became a unique title of honor and glory for she is the mother of the incarnate word. This dogma concentrates attention on the glory of God shining on the mother of Jesus. Mary's divine motherhood has deep and solid roots in Scripture where she is called by that title twenty-five times. Mary is the human being who most resembles the perfect image of God, the incarnate Word. In her, the divine image can be contemplated. She was praised as the great *Theotokos.* She has reached the final glorification toward which the Church aspires. Mary's divine motherhood is the key to interpreting the mystery of the incarnation. This mystery invites Christians to become God-bearers and to bear God in the world today. Theological reflection on Mary did not give rise to her veneration. This veneration sprang from the liturgy and gradually revealed the unique place of Christ's Mother in the economy of salvation. After Ephesus, her feasts multiplied, devotions became more fervent. Her purity, which had been praised in such glowing terms, led to questions about the decomposition of her

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[5]Eamon Duffy, "Madonnas that Maim?" *Christianity and the Cult of the Virgin Mary* (Aquinas Lecture at Glasgow, 1998).

body in death. In fact, death seemed no longer compatible with the dignity of the Mother of God. She was the awe-inspiring *Theotokos* in whom the very transcendence of the creator was reflected. Poets and hymn writers used a variety of Old Testament typology to describe her: Mountain of God; bush unconsumed by fire; Aaron's rod which blossomed; ark of imperishable wood; lampstand of pure gold which bears the lamp which burns forever; jar of gold which concealed the manna; Jacob's ladder by which Jesus came down to earth; queen who stands at the king's right hand.[6]

Patristic Period

It may be a surprise to discover that, as late as the time of Augustine, there is no mention of hymns, prayers or Marian feasts in the West. Only in the fifth century does one have the first hymn directly saluting Mary. Her name was not inserted into the Roman Canon until the sixth century. The titles "Mother of Mercy" and "Mater Dolorosa" were applied to her in the sixth century. The feasts of her annunciation, "dormition" and purification were not adopted in the West until the seventh century. By the end of the Patristic period, the main doctrinal and devotional lines had been traced. Mariology, as well as Marian liturgy and Marian poetry, had reached a far more advanced stage in the East than in the West, where the language about Mary was for more restrained. The context for devotion and praise was both doctrinal and liturgical. Under the influence of Tertullian (d. 225) and Augustine (d. 430), and with theology's preoccupation with original sin, Mary's grace-filled figure was contemplated as a type of the Church itself. Her intimate relationship with the Church was affirmed by Ambrose (d. 397), who may be called the father of western Mariology, and by Augustine. The question of whether Mary was exempt from original sin appears not to have been asked at this stage. Her assumption seems to have been accepted only in Gaul. Her queenship and power of

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[6]Cited in Archimandrite Ephrem, "Mary in Eastern Church Literature," *The Month* 22 (1989), 315 ff.

intercession are treated much more soberly, and there is no question yet of her mediation.

Early Middle Ages

In the eighth century in the West, one finds the influence of the Greeks on Latin Mariology. This was due to the fact that many of the Greek monks had settled down in Sicily to escape the persecution of the emperors. They blended the splendor of the Byzantine image of the glorious queen, mistress of heaven and earth, interceding on behalf of everyone, with that of the tender mother, giving her maternal love and tenderness to all. In the later Byzantine period, the first author to have attempted a life of Mary was Epiphanus the Monk (d. c. 800). He made use of much apocryphal material as well as New Testament data, and presented her according to the Byzantine ideal of beauty. He described her grave, dignified bearing with light brown hair and eyes, black eyebrows, a straight nose, a long face and long hands and fingers.

The first aspect of medieval Marian devotion arose from sheer delight in what God had done for her, how she embodied God's love for the people and helped to realize God's designs in the world. Central to this devotion was the graciousness of Mary's *fiat* at the Annunciation. It was especially in the monasteries that an almost mystical form of Marian piety flourished. There were statues of the Virgin in the chapel, refectory, the garden. There were writings about Mary in the library. The monks prayed the little office of the Blessed Virgin daily and gave the Song of Songs a Marian interpretation. Virginity as the subject of meditation had a particular significance. To quote Elizabeth Johnson, "Living, enfleshed women, fallen and dangerous to the monastic vocation, had been left outside the monastery; in the Virgin, the monk found the heavenly ideal of woman, which could solace and uplift his heart."[7]

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[7]Elizabeth Johnson, "Marian Devotion in the Western Church," *Christian Spirituality: High Middle Ages and Reformation: An Encyclopedic History of the Religious Quest*, ed. Jill Raitt (New York: Crossroad, 1986), 392-414.

High Middle Ages

As European culture revived, the cult of Mary began to grow. Crowds flocked to attend the monastery festivals connected with the Marian feasts. Together with the monks, the faithful contemplated the beauty and the glory of the Virgin Mary. A flourishing trade led to the rebirth of towns and the rise of a new merchant class. Glorious Gothic cathedrals were built, usually dedicated to Mary, and sophisticated schools of theology sprang up. By the twelfth century, devotion to her was widespread. In fact, this century was known as the golden age of Mariology. Theological reflection on Mary was chiefly developed by the Cistercians, especially Saint Bernard of Clairvaux. Bernard fostered a form of meditative writing which expressed an intense devotion to her.

This was the age of the Crusades, of feudalism, and of courtly love. These developments also had their influence on Marian doctrine and devotion. Mary was hailed in chivalrous terms as the fair lady of the knights. She was addressed as "Our Lady" and "Madonna," respectful titles given to feudal aristocrats. These were both symbols of chaste love. Mary, a simple Palestinian housewife, could not meet the needs of the aristocratic ladies. Before they could venerate her they had to make her one of themselves. From the simple maiden of Nazareth she became the great Queen of Heaven, assigned a place above the Church, between God and the highest angels.

Among the Latin preachers and theologians, the doctrine of the Immaculate Conception became the topic of discussion and theological debate. Discussed were such questions as: Did Mary have to struggle against sin? Was she conceived and sanctified by the Spirit from her mother's womb? The Augustinian doctrine of original sin played a decisive part in this controversy. On the other hand, popular religious literature embellished the biblical and apocryphal stories about Christ and his mother. Feasts in her honor became even more elaborate; some were preceded by a vigil, others even by a two-week fast (in the sixteenth century, this exaggerated cult of the Virgin would be stamped out by the Reformers in all Protestant countries). The intensification

of interest in Mary in the medieval period, as well as the emphasis on her exalted role in human salvation, provided a "feminizing" element in an otherwise wholly male-dominated religion. It has been suggested that she replaced the mother goddess Christianity lacked; at the level of popular devotion, she occupied the place left vacant by Isis, Cybele, and the other goddesses.[8] However, her theological isolation from all other women prevented her from functioning psychologically as a model for women.[9]

Consciousness of sin and fear of judgment were characteristics of the conscience of this era. The awesome figure of God the Father as stern king and just judge was difficult to approach. A high Christology too, tended to distance Christ from ordinary people. Like the distant feudal kings, he was too threatening to be approached directly. God, it was thought, could not forgive sin without demanding satisfaction, and sinful people experienced the temptations of Satan and the dangers of eternal torment in hell as very real. Divine mercy, however, found its expression in the mother of Jesus, who, like a kind-hearted, feudal noblewoman, could plead with her son for those who sought her intercession. She embodied God's love for the people. Consequently, the enormous veneration poured out toward Mary expressed itself in the multiplication of prayers, relics, shrines, feasts and narrations of miraculous cures. In the process, Mary often outshone Jesus and, occasionally, even God the Father. The handmaid of the Lord, as she is described in Luke's Magnificat, now becomes "Our Lady," a woman actively concerned about the person seeking salvation. There was also a shift from a liturgical perspective to a personal one, and this was expressed in the proliferation of new devotions. As the embodiment of God's love, she even substituted for God as the acting subject of

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[8]See Theodore Roszak, *Where the Wasteland Ends: Politics and Transcendence in Post-Industrial Society* (New York: Doubleday & Co., 1973).

[9]Eleanor McLaughlin, "Equality of Souls, Inequality of Sexes: Woman in Medieval Theology," *Religion and Sexism,* ed. Rosemary R. Ruether (New York: Simon & Schuster, 1974), 246.

divine deeds and the recipient of divine glory and praise, as found in the medieval version of the standard prayer, the *Te Deum:*

> We praise thee, O Mother of God; we confess thee, Mary ever Virgin.... Thee all angels and archangels, thrones and principalities serve. Thee all powers and virtues in heaven and all dominations obey. Before thee all the angelic choirs, the cherubim and seraphim, exulting, stand. With unceasing voice every angelic creature proclaims thee: Holy, holy, holy, Mary Virgin Mother of God.

Thirteenth Century

The ferment of intellectual life associated with the new universities began to change the social structures of monastic-centered Christianity. A new generation of people emerged, anxious to live the Gospel outside the traditional monastic structure. The ministry of preaching to the laity was undertaken by the new mendicant orders like the Franciscans, Dominicans, and Servites. They focused on Jesus in the poverty of his humanity; in scenes of the crib and the cross, Mary was always present in a human role. At the same time, scholastic theology was developing an understanding of redemption that emphasized the need to make satisfaction for sin. The awe-inspiring Virgin Mother of Christ now becomes the Mother of Mercy who mediates between Christ and sinners. While the development of theological thought was now taking place outside the monasteries, the rigor of scholastic theology with its emphasis on the faculty of reason had little room for affectivity or imagination. Compounding the problem was the fact that the language of scholarly discourse and liturgy was Latin. Latin liturgy and scholastic theology became ever more remote from the ordinary experience of people, at a time when life was hard and often dangerous.

The Immaculate Conception continued to evoke theological discussion. Don Scotus initiated a new way of looking at this mystery. He asserted that Mary was equally dependent on Christ, whether Christ's grace preserved her from sin or sanctified her in the womb (the more common opinion at that time). Beyond this controversy,

Mary appeared only in the great *Summas,* and then only in relation to questions about the Incarnation.

The people loved the Virgin, so it is natural to expect that other strains of Marian piety and ways of venerating Mary continued to come from the popular religious imagination of the people. The meditative writings, known as *Mirrors* of the Blessed Virgin Mary and initiated earlier by Saint Bernard, provided an opportunity to express an intense devotion to her and it appealed to a wider and more popular audience. For example, one Psalter contains the following:

> Sing to Our Lady a new song: for she hath done wonderful things. In the sight of the nations she had revealed her mercy; her name is heard even to the ends of the earth.
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> Be mindful, O Lady, of the poor and wretched, and support them by the help of thy holy refreshment. For you, O Lady, art sweet and true, exceedingly patient and full of compassion (Ps. 96/97).

One must be slow, however, to make superficial or hasty judgments about Marian devotions, either in their popular preaching or devotional expressions, however bizarre some of these expressions may seem today. The simpler Catholic faithful, especially the poor and the deprived, have sought in Mary a strength which enabled them to interpret life, to experience the love of God in their lives, to feel accompanied and not abandoned, and to continue to hope, no matter how bad the circumstances and tragedies of their lives.

Fourteenth and Fifteenth Centuries

The earlier spirituality that focused on Mary's person now shifted from contemplation to a popular imagination that was less critical. In the imagination of the people, there was intense reverence toward her. With her maternal influence over God, she mediated God's grace to unworthy sinners. She functioned as a merciful and tender mother caring for her spiritual children. There were, however, lots of abuses prevalent in the Mariology of this late medieval period. Focus on the mystery of the Incarnation was now replaced by a magical idea of Mary

as mother who could solve all problems. Rene Laurentin comments on the fourteenth century:

> Repelled by desiccated intellectualism, people sought life on the imaginative and sentimental plane. Throughout this period of decadence popular enthusiasm for the Blessed Virgin never faltered, but the adulterated fodder it was nourished on consisted of trumpery miracles, ambiguous slogans, and inconsistent maundering.[10]

Because of such natural disasters as the Great Plague, the experiences of the Hundred Years' War, the Great Western Schism and the insecurities in a harsh world, people prayed to Mary, Mother of Mercy, for her protection from dangers pressing from every side. When one fifth of the population of Europe was wiped out by plagues, people sought consolation in the image of the sorrowing mother at the foot of the cross. For Christians who could not afford to make the pilgrimage to Jerusalem, the Franciscans encouraged them to follow the Via Dolorosa, to journey with Mary to the cross. This was a way of sharing in the sufferings of Mary and her son.

At times Mary's ability to rescue the sinner became the focus of devotion so that she often functioned independently of God or Jesus. Jesus appeared more and more distant in the theology of the period as well as in popular imagination, and was often viewed as harsh king and judge. Mary became the gentle intercessor, able to change her Son's mind, sometimes even manipulative in the process. She became a mediator between sinful humankind and a distant and sometimes vengeful Christ. No excellence was too great to attribute to her; all beauty, goodness and virtue were in her possession. Her idealized image provided a welcome contrast to the often ugly and dangerous world of everyday life.

Popular preaching designated her Queen of Heaven and Refuge

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[10]Cited in Elizabeth Johnson, "Marian Devotion in the Western Church," *Christian Spirituality: High Middle Ages and Reformation: An Encyclopedic History of the Religious Quest,* ed. Jill Raitt (New York: Crossroad, 1986), 411.

of Sinners, and placed her at the center of the process of personal salvation. Some even understood such titles as Queen of Heaven to be the re-emergence of the suppressed mother goddess of prehistoric times. While theologians today may interpret her usurpation of the role of Christ as a deterioration of Mariology, anthropologists, on the other hand, analyze it as an appreciation of what has traditionally been termed "the feminine element" in the world. This feminine figure which embodies the attributes of tenderness and compassion grieves with the sorrowful rather than punishing them for their offences. Devotion to the compassionate Mother of Mercy who embodied God's love expressed a need for a religious experience of the feminine in the divine, an experience not available through the understanding of God at the time. Feminist writers also argue that the projection of the patriarchal family structure into heaven, with the harsh authority figure of the father being tempered by the intercession of the mother who is concerned about the wayward child, was done at women's expense. Fashioning an image of woman according to androcentric perceptions left the situation of women unaffected by the glorification of one woman, Mary.

Because of an underdeveloped pneumatology—which to quote Elizabeth Johnson remained in an embryonic state—the figure of Mary assumed the caring qualities of the divine. In a much-quoted article, "Mary and the Protestant Mind," Elsie Gibson observes that when she began to study Catholic theology, every place she expected to find an exposition of the Holy Spirit, she found Mary, and she adds, "What Protestants universally attribute to the action of the Holy Spirit was attributed to Mary."[11] Catholic piety tended to view her as spiritually present to guide and inspire, to console and intercede—all actions which, in the Scriptures, belong to the Spirit (Jn 14:16; 15:26).

While Marian doctrine and devotion developed considerably between the eleventh and fifteenth centuries in the West, they remained

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[11]Elsie Gibson, "Mary and the Protestant Mind," *Review for Religious* 24 (1965), 397.

more static in the East. This was due to the fact that the influences of both the Augustinian doctrine of original sin, as well as that of scholastic theology, were absent there. In the West too, the doctrine of original sin played a decisive part in the controversy about the Immaculate Conception.

Sixteenth Century

The first challenge to the abuses and distortions of the late medieval Church, as well as to the popular cult of Mary, came with the Reformation. Erasmus, who honored the Virgin, called for a correction of distortions in devotion to her, a combination that will appear again and again in subsequent history. He was concerned that her devotees ignored God, believed that Christ reigning in heaven was subject to his mother and that candles, images and chants to Mary substituted for an ethical Christian life. By the time of the Reformation, something like a purgation was long overdue. The Protestant reformers deplored the lack of trust in God's grace and mercy communicated through Christ alone. Protestant and Catholic thinkers alike objected to the excesses of popular belief. The magical and healing powers of relics, for example, led to their becoming objects of devotion. Luther himself showed a tender devotion to the Virgin, especially in his early sermons. In his commentary on the *Magnificat,* he described Mary as a woman of faith, and a model of God's grace for the world. He retained a remarkable amount of Catholic teaching which was only dismissed by his successors. However, he equated the exaggerations of Catholic devotion to Mary with the cult of Baal, which was denounced by the prophets.[12] Luther stressed that the true basis of Mary's dignity was as a believer, and any special blessings given to her were through the merits of Christ and not due to her own special merits.

The Reformers did not turn against Mary in herself. They rejected

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[12]Cited in Graef, *Mary: A History of Doctrine and Devotion Vol. II,* 10.

her veneration on Christological grounds. Luther's polemic was aimed essentially at what seemed to him to be the false honor given to Mary. The Reformers felt that praying to Mary and asking for favors detracted from Christ as the sole mediator between God and human beings. Charles Dickson notes that contemporary Protestant writers are prepared to contend that Protestantism has made a serious mistake in its opposition to the Virgin:

> Ignoring the place of the Blessed Virgin in the Incarnation and the whole process of salvation has given Protestantism a harsh thoroughly masculine emphasis.... The absence of ... [tenderness and affection] in Protestantism has led to an overemphasis on a harsh prophetic picture of God with its attending preoccupation with judgment.... The development of a mature Mariology in Protestant thinking could do much to temper the harsh portrayal of the God of judgment and provide it with a healthy ... concept of a God of mercy.[13]

In the polemical post-reformation period, Mary was almost eliminated from the Protestant traditions. If anything, Protestant criticisms of Marian devotions increased Catholic enthusiasm for it. Catholics multiplied their efforts to preserve her exalted status. This exalted image stands in stark contrast to that of the Virgin of Guadalupe, who took the form of a simple Indian peasant woman when she appeared to Juan Diego in Mexico in 1531, and affirmed the indigenous people over and against the Spanish *conquistadores.*

Seventeenth Century

In the seventeenth century, a hundred years after the Reformation, Marian devotions reached a second peak, especially in France, which emerged as the spiritual leader of Western Christendom. The vision of the French school of spirituality, whose doctrinal foundations stemmed from Pierre de Berulle, the founder of the French Oratory,

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[13]Charles Dickson, "Mariology: A Protestant Reconsideration," *American Ecclesiastical Review* 168 (1974), 306-307.

passed almost unchallenged down to the twentieth century. Their Marian spirituality, obviously a product of wider theological and cultural trends of the time, now appears often sentimental and exaggerated. The French school was the matrix of the Jansenist error and devotional excess. Some French Catholics believed that it sufficed to be devoted to Mary alone in order to be saved. Pierre de Berulle (d. 1629), the founder of a society of priests known as the French Oratory, even went so far as to say that Mary's *fiat* in assenting to the Incarnation is "much more powerful in its issue and effect than the word that God pronounced when creating the universe."[14] With Louis-Marie Grignion de Montfort (d. 1716), the French school reached its peak of Marian devotion. De Montfort has been called the master *par excellence* of Marian devotion. His best known work is *The True Devotion to the Blessed Virgin.*[15] He believed that it was more perfect not to approach God directly, but to go more humbly through a mediator. This was a rather Jansenist attitude, although the Jansenists themselves were certainly opposed to de Montfort. Small tokens of love for the Blessed Virgin, he said, were not sufficient for salvation. He therefore demanded a complete interior surrender to her so as to be entirely formed by her.

Such devotional teaching and practices were often very dubious. Confraternities of the "slaves of Mary" bound themselves in spiritual slavery to Mary, wearing small chains about their necks or wrists as a sign of their bondage.[16] Some took a vow, even to martyrdom, to defend belief in the Immaculate Conception (which was not yet official Catholic doctrine). Popular manuals of devotion for an increasing literate population were often filled with bizarre piety about Mary. This piety included such stories as that of Mary renewing her vows of victim

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[14]Graef, *Mary: A History of Doctrine and Devotion Vol. II,* 32.

[15]Graef, *Mary: A History of Doctrine and Devotion Vol. II,* 57, [Emphasis added].

[16]Graef, *Mary: A History of Doctrine and Devotion Vol. II,* 34.

and servant at age three,[17] or enjoying the angelic light that showed her all the actions of Jesus' soul while he was still in her womb.[18]

Eighteenth Century

The eighteenth century Enlightenment was a philosophical movement that rejected extrinsic authority in favor of the authority of reason. This movement—emphasizing freedom of inquiry, freedom of decision, and freedom of action—posed a serious crisis for the Church, which, until then, had the sole authority to determine what was true and what was not. Few Enlightenment thinkers had much use for what they saw to be extravagant superstitions of religion. Their emphasis on rationalism provided little support for the romantic and sentimental devotion of the previous period. Led by the popular writings of Voltaire, they dismissed apparitions as gullible offenses against reason. Even the Church, increasingly restrained by secular power, and tempted by Enlightenment rationalism, lost interest in promoting the cult. Marian feasts were stricken from local Church calendars, shrines fell into ruin, and excessive devotions were discouraged. During the French Revolution, some churches removed their statues of Mary, and the statue of the goddess of reason was enthroned in Notre Dame cathedral in Paris. Marian literature ceased to exist, although popular devotion was catered for by sermons and by pamphlets put out by congregations particularly devoted to Mary. The Jesuits, promoters of the Marian cult, were disbanded.

From the Nineteenth Century to Vatican II

The nineteenth century marked the beginning of the "Age of Mary." The republican ideals of the Revolution had failed in France.

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[17]Graef, *Mary: A History of Doctrine and Devotion Vol. II,* 35.

[18]Graef, *Mary: A History of Doctrine and Devotion Vol. II,* 33.

Romanticism—an attitude of mind favorable to irrational influences and to emotional, as well as mystical, experiences and which rejected the Enlightenment program—had failed. Marian teaching and devotion benefited from this new mood, and Catholic revival, under the long-lived Pius IX, signaled the rebirth of the Marian cult. Alphonsus Ligouri's book, *The Glories of Mary,* was one of his most popular works on Marian devotions. For Ligouri, Mary's role in this world was to raise up souls that had fallen from divine grace and to reconcile them to God, a role traditionally given to Christ. If God is angry with a sinner, he says, "Mary takes him under her protection, [and] withholds the avenging arm of her Son, and saves him."[19] The growing demand to have the doctrine of the Immaculate Conception officially defined signaled the need for official recognition of Mary. While it was first defined at the Council of Basel in 1439, it was not proclaimed as a dogma of the universal Church until 1854.

By the mid-century, apparitions of Mary were recorded all over Europe, especially in France: Paris in 1830; Rome in 1842; La Salette in 1846; Lourdes in 1858; Normandy in 1871; Knock, Ireland, in 1879. Both in popular preaching and in theological discussion, Mary had become a more and more autonomous figure. She was no longer seen in the Trinitarian, Christological or ecclesial contexts within which the early Christians had seen her. High on a pedestal, she represented a privatized world of beauty and harmony far removed from the gross world of everyday life. There was an exaggerated emphasis given to human dependence on her. Certain interpretations of the devotion promulgated by Louis Grignon de Montfort became popular once more with the revival of a spirituality that had declined in the age of the Enlightenment. De Montfort's emphasis on "To Jesus through Mary" is a case in point here. Little attention was paid to Mary's own dependence on Christ.

The nineteenth century may have been the age of the suppressed woman, but Rosemary Haughton reminds all that the wilting and

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[19]Graef, *Mary: A History of Doctrine and Devotion Vol. II,* 75.

submissive Victorian lady on whom Mary was modeled was really the last desperate effort of a lost cause.[20] It was also an age of very strong women. The Women's Suffrage Movement was a symbol of a changed consciousness and expectations that would continue to ask disturbing questions about gender privilege. Ivone Gebara and Maria Clara Bingemer add:

> At each new historical moment for Christians, the mystery of Mary unveils a different facet, one that can deeply touch the needs of the poor and believing people ... and places women in active participation on an equal basis with men.... This perspective is not yet something achieved in our era, but it is being announced strongly and vigorously, and it brings life for the future.[21]

The first sixty years of the twentieth century saw the continued importance of Marian enthusiasm. Further apparitions were recorded at Fatima in Portugal in 1917, and at Beauraing, Belgium, in 1932. Lay groups designed to carry out a Marian-oriented apostolate led to the blossoming of confraternities and movements, strangely enough with a distinctly militant flavor. The Legion of Mary founded in 1921 and the Blue Army in 1947 are examples of such movements. The Legion of Mary was organized on the model of an army, its members promising to serve in this warfare, which is perpetually waged by the Church against the world and its evil powers. Inspired by the spirituality of Grignon de Montfort, the legionary becomes a slave of Mary, committing absolutely everything to her.

In 1950, the promulgation of the dogma of the Assumption marked another jewel in Mary's crown. Piety and theology kept pace with these official documents. It was held that "never enough honor can be given to Mary." Rosemary Haughton, comparing present and medieval images of Mary, writes:

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[20]Rosemary Haughton, "Hope for a Tree" (Unpublished paper), 14.

[21]Ivone Gebara and Maria Clara Bingemer, *Mary: Mother of God, Mother of the Poor* (Maryknoll, New York: Orbis Books, 1989), 25.

> The crowned and superb Queen of the older images, and even gentle, vital and confident young Mother of medieval iconography, gave way to a meek, melancholy, and scarcely adult virgin, who during the nineteenth century, was allowed less and less bosom and no crown at all. Even Bernadette's vision at Lourdes of an irrepressibly lively and young but regal "Lady" was modified to meet the current requirement: tilted head, wilting body, resigned expression; and women, and most especially "religious" women, were required to identify with this model. Many did so, internalizing to such an extent that no other way of being devout could be imagined.[22]

In this century too, Mary has stood between heaven and earth, a quasi-divine being, and was often exalted as the "Mediatrix of all Graces," "Co-redemptrix," and "Mother of the Church." Catholic spirituality came close to divinizing Mary as a co-principle of redemption. The confusions and exaggerations about Mary—conceptual and imaginative—reached their peak in the 1950s. Such was the situation on the eve of the Second Vatican Council, and it was the task of the Council to bring Marian devotion within the limits of sound theology and practice.

Conclusion

The Council's choice to include its teaching on Mary in *Lumen Gentium 8—within* the doctrine of the church, thus connecting her again to the community of saints—signals a new point of departure. However, it is feminist theology that offers the greatest critique of traditional Marian images. It argues that patriarchal Mariology idealizes one woman to the detriment of all others. "Alone of all her sex," she stands pure and blessed by God.[23] Setting Mary apart from the rest

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[22]Haughton, "Hope for a Tree," 15.

[23]Marina Warner, *Alone of All Her Sex: The Myth and Cult of the Virgin Mary* (New York: Vintage Books/Random House, 1983), xvii: "The title of the book is taken from Caelius Sedulius' verse: 'But alone of all her sex she pleased the Lord'."

of women suggests that she is acceptable because she did not share the corruption that was inevitably attached to the female condition. Feminists also argue that elements oppressive to women pervade the Marian tradition, and that Marian devotions and certain interpretations of Marian doctrines are detrimental to women and continue to impede their liberation. The image of Mary as the perfect model of submission, they argue, is a construct of the patriarchal mind which hails submission as the most commendable virtue of women.

However, the Marian tradition has had liberating effects on both men and women. She has kept the image of woman central to the process of salvation. Secondly, the centrality of her image in Catholicism points to a deep intuition that God cannot be adequately portrayed in images that describe God's activities only as creating, redeeming, and administering justice.[24] The tendency to apply quasi-divine attributes such as "co-redemptrix" to Mary is in itself a critique of this persistently controlling imaging of God in Christianity. Through the long history of the Christian tradition, no one single image of Mary emerged, but rather *The Thousand Faces of the Virgin Mary,* to quote the apt title of George Tavard's book.[25] It is in folk piety rather than in scholarly reflection that the multiplication of Mary's faces and the diversification of images of Mary has taken place. She has been treated in folk piety as a mirror of the divine attributes of boundless compassion and of healing power, for she reflects the benevolent God who is supreme power and goodness.[26] The cult of Mary, which nourished the popular religious imagination with its candles, lights and pilgrimages, developed a far richer tapestry of devotion compared to

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[24]See Ann Carr, *Transforming Grace* (San Francisco: Harper and Row, 1988), 134-214. See also Sally McFague, *Metaphorical Theology: Models of God in Religious Language* (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1985), 98-101.

[25]George Tavard, *The Thousand Faces of the Virgin Mary* (Collegeville: The Liturgical Press, 1996).

[26]Tavard, *The Thousand Faces of the Virgin Mary,* 248.

what the theology of the Word or a catechetical course has ever been able to do.

She is at once a pervasive presence and a many-sided symbol. Because words are often too thin to echo experience, Christians need more than words to bring the inner mystery to expression. Mary incarnates dimensions of meaning that cannot simply be put into words, meanings that arise from the deepest feelings of the human heart as faith, hope and love stir within us. "In Mary, the earth has opened to bud forth a savior. She is the splendid icon of the Living God, the icon of Trinitarian love." Through her the Church inhales and breathes forth the Holy Breath of the Father and Son. She sensitizes all to the immensity of the divine mystery of mercy into which they have been drawn. As a final word, one can cite a Marian phrase frequently used by Bishop Casaldáliga of Brazil: she is "So Full of God, Yet So Much Ours." As Irenaeus of Lyon has said: "God himself it was who gave us the sign of the Virgin."