A Marian Spirituality for Lay Ecclesial Ministers

by William H. Johnston

When the US Catholic bishops called for cultivating “a Marian spirituality” in the spiritual formation of lay ecclesial ministers,¹ what did they have in mind, and how might it be done? This essay proposes to explore these questions in four steps, considering in turn: (1) several reasons for cultivating this form of spirituality among lay ecclesial ministers today; (2) six possible themes and sources to draw on; (3) a few practices with which one could begin or deepen this form of spirituality; and (4) a selected bibliography of resources in this field of study whose literature is virtually unlimited and ever expanding.

Cultivating a Marian Spirituality Among Lay Ecclesial Ministers

To understand why the bishops have called for lay ecclesial ministers to cultivate a Marian spirituality—a call applicable as well to ordained ecclesial ministers and, indeed, to all Catholics—let us consider the matter from four perspectives: historical, pastoral, scriptural-devotional, and ecclesial.

First, there are the historical reasons. Interest in and devotion to Mary have been part of the church’s life throughout its history. There is evidence for this in first century New Testament literature, in second century extra-canonical literature, and in every century since then, up to our own era. If we give this historical fact due weight and trust that so many Christians for so many generations across so many cultures did not fundamentally get it wrong, this can move us toward cultivating or confirm a Marian spirituality as well. We will with good reason accept that, despite excesses which should also be noted and avoided, in general the theological insights, devotional spirit, and prayer customs pertaining to Mary that developed over the centuries can have something valid and worthwhile to offer us today. For the sake of being broadly and fully Catholic, it is well and fitting for lay ecclesial ministers not only to know this history but to share in this devotion in some way themselves.

Secondly, there are pastoral reasons for cultivating a Marian spirituality today. Building effective pastoral relationships in many ministerial contexts today can be aided by having, as persons in those contexts do, a living awareness of the communion of saints and a sense of relationship with Mary in particular. Lacking such a shared experience could hinder the formation or weaken the strength of one’s relationships with, for example, many Latino/a Catholics or contemporary young adults who have discovered forms of Marian devotion. If only

for the sake of sharing common ground with many of the people of the Catholic Church in the early twenty-first century United States, lay ecclesial ministers would want to have and cultivate a Marian spirituality.

Third, there are scriptural-devotional reasons for incorporating this spirituality in lay ecclesial ministry formation. Think, in a devotional spirit, of the Jesus the gospels present to us; think behind the text of the gospels to the actual family life that helped form him into who he became as an adult. How did Jesus get to be that kind of person? How might his family, and specifically his mother, have influenced the development of his fully human maturity and character? Think, for example, of his encounters and relationships with women: with the woman at the well (Jn 4); the Canaanite woman (Mt 15:21–28); the women who followed him and supported him out of their means (Lk 8:2–3); the woman caught in the act of adultery (Jn 8:3–11); Martha and Mary whom he loved (Jn 11:5); the woman who came so close as to wash his feet with her tears and dry them with her hair, kissing his feet and anointing them with ointment (Lk 7:38); the women who followed him to Jerusalem and to his crucifixion, watching from a distance (Mk 15:40–41) or from close by (Jn 19:25)—all quite remarkable. The question naturally arises: did his mother have anything to do with his ability to relate so freely and so well with women? Did he learn this from her? If so, and if lay ecclesial ministers developed their own relationship with her through the practices of a Marian spirituality, would her formational influence on them be similarly liberating and life-giving? In particular, what could men in ministry today (lay and ordained) learn from Mary, as well as from Jesus, about relating to women? And what could women in ministry learn from her about relating to Jesus? Imaginative, devotional reflections along these lines could be illuminating and helpfully formative.

Finally, we can see an ecclesial reason to cultivate a Marian spirituality in lay ecclesial ministry formation with the potential to open up a more fruitful connection with that still pivotal and seminal event in the church’s recent history, the Second Vatican Council. How best to understand that event is a matter of some discussion and even contention in the church today. Debate centers around two differing approaches, described by Pope Benedict XVI in his Address to the Roman Curia on December 22, 2005.2 One way to interpret the council and its documents is what the pope calls a “hermeneutic of discontinuity and rupture.” This approach characterizes the council as a source of newness understood specifically in its difference from or even repudiation of what went before. Conciliar passages emphasizing continuity are viewed as compromises more or less antithetical to the genuine intentions of the council; such passages are best discounted so as to build the church’s theological and pastoral agenda more properly on texts mandating new directions. Pope Benedict considers this approach overly one-sided, to that extent misguided, and, if followed unrelentingly, misleading and divisive.

He recommends instead an alternate approach he thinks more true and fair to the council’s texts and intentions and more historically, theologically, and pastorally defensible. He calls this approach a “hermeneutic of reform,” which entails—as he describes with some nuance, providing historical context and illustrative examples—a “combination of continuity and discontinuity at different levels,” promoting in this way a “process of innovation in continuity.” Both hermeneutics recognize newness and innovation as the legitimate fruit of the council, but they do so in ways that yield distinctive theological and pastoral priorities, styles, and effects.

The call of the US Catholic bishops for a place for Marian spirituality in the spiritual formation of lay ecclesial ministers can be seen as a theological endorsement and pastoral implementation of Pope Benedict’s “hermeneutic of reform.” If it is the case—as I think the pope and bishops would maintain—that Marian devotion went into a significant decline in Catholic life and practice in the postconciliar era; that such an outcome was not in fact what the council called for in its documents or intended to bring about; that this was instead an instance of the impact of the

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2  Benedict XVI, “Address of His Holiness Benedict XVI to the Roman Curia Offering Them His Christmas Greetings,” http://www.vatican.va/holy_father/benedict_xvi/speeches/2005/december/documents/hf_ben_xvi_spe_20051222_roman-curia_en.html. All citations in this and the following paragraph are from this text.
hermeneutic of discontinuity and rupture; and that, as we are now in what could be called the post-postconciliar era, ameliorative measures in the spirit of the hermeneutic of reform are timely and to be desired, then one such measure could be the promotion and cultivation of a sound Marian piety among lay ecclesial ministers. Thus there was a paragraph on this topic in the spiritual formation section of Co-Workers.

These reasons may help explain why the bishops would consider the cultivation of a Marian spirituality among lay ecclesial ministers a sound, timely, and fruitful development, not only in initial and ongoing formation programs but also by implication in the regular practice and lived experience of lay ecclesial ministry. But how would one go about doing this? What forms would it take, and what sources would it draw from?

**Six Forms and Sources of Marian Spirituality**

Among the many ways one could give shape to and resource a Marian spirituality, let us look at six that suggest something of the range of possibilities.

**Biblical**

Scripture is foundational for all forms of Marian spirituality, for all must ultimately base themselves on the Marian passages in the New Testament, read in the context of the full biblical revelation. To study these passages is to encounter Mary in her historical, cultural, and religious context. To pray with these passages is to form and sustain a relationship with her that can assume a rich diversity of dimensions and dynamics. Both study and prayer are important. The Pontifical Biblical Commission’s 1993 statement, The Interpretation of the Bible in the Church, offers guidance regarding methods of study. Some traditional methods of prayer with scripture are noted below, in the section on “Practices.”

**Magisterial**

Lay ecclesial ministers can read and learn from church documents on Mary, finding her presented as, for example, a model of how to listen and respond to God’s call or of how to be a person attentive to others’ needs and creative in responding to them. The Marian chapter of the council’s dogmatic constitution on the church is the foundational text here. (LG 8, 52–68) Particularly helpful as well is Pope Paul VI’s apostolic exhortation, Marialis Cultus (1974); in this work he speaks to that immediately postconciliar thought-world which, to some degree, is yet extant, explaining in ways that are still helpful the conciliar reforms regarding Mary and showing how Marian piety is a thoroughly legitimate postconciliar practice. Attention should also be given to the US Catholic bishops’ pastoral letter, Behold Your Mother (1973). Finally, Pope John Paul II provided a theological reflection on Mary in Redemptoris Mater (Mother of the Redeemer, 1987) and gave encouragement to use the rosary as a means of Christ-centered contemplative prayer in Rosarium Virginis Mariae (On the Most Holy Rosary, 2002). All of these sources provide rich food for thought for the development of a sound and well-informed contemporary Marian spirituality.

**Hispanic**

One way to understand, respect, and form community with Latin@ Catholics is to understand, respect, and share in Marian devotions. As the US Catholic bishops have said, “authentic and consistent devotion to Mary, the Mother of God” is a value particularly cherished by Hispanic Catholics.³ Because the church in the United States is increasingly Hispanic, these traditions and forms of Catholicism have a particular salience for those in pastoral ministry.

It is important to note there are many “Marys” throughout the Hispanic world, and lay ecclesial ministers should be willing to learn, from those whom they serve, the unique story and charism of their experience of Mary. At the same time, however, some attention to Our Lady of Guadalupe makes sense for all formation programs because of the prominence of Catholics from Mexico in the United States, because of the many celebrations in her honor on her liturgical feast day of December 12, and because of her title as Patroness of the Americas. In Our Lady of Guadalupe we can find, as John Paul II did, “an impressive example of a perfectly inculturated evangelization.”

She embodies vividly a true preferential option for the poor and oppressed, manifesting not only a spiritual presence to them but an actual personal identification with them. Such points as these can offer lay ecclesial ministers food for thought, inspiration for personal action, and a sense of direction in discerning ministerial priorities.

Devotional

There are many ways to cultivate a “devotion” to Mary, the woman who is the Mother of God (an ancient title) and Mother of the Church (a more recent one). One can develop a strong relationship through use of the rosary, for example; with icons, entering into the rich Orthodox tradition of devotion to Mary; or by learning about a religious community whose charism is related to Mary—for example, the Marianists (S.M.) or the Congregation of the Sisters, Servants of the Immaculate Heart of Mary (I.H.M.).

The 2002 document from the Congregation for Divine Worship and the Discipline of the Sacraments, Directory on Popular Piety and the Liturgy, provides very helpful general principles which apply “in varying degrees and modes” to all Marian devotions: they should have Trinitarian, Christological, pneumatic, and ecclesial dimensions; be in touch with Scripture and Tradition; and give consideration to ecumenical, anthropological, eschatological, and missionary concerns.

Following these guidelines will keep any Marian devotion well-grounded and balanced.

Feminist

In the process of doing theological reflection, when tradition and experience come together, sometimes tradition enlightens or critiques our experience, and sometimes our experience questions or critiques tradition. In a similar way, a feminist perspective on Mary and all things Marian in the church’s tradition may at times be informed by tradition and at times may offer insights that illuminate, question, or raise objections that critique it, perhaps even severely. Feminist readings of the tradition may, for example, point out that the image of “Mary most obedient” has been used to keep women silent and submissive; “Mary ever-virgin” can translate into repression of sexuality; or the Mary who intercedes but has no authority and makes no decisions. Hispanic women writers speak also of the problem of marianismo, a counterpart of male machismo—when men are abusive, women are to endure.

Out of the six sources discussed here, it is perhaps in the feminist sources where the “hermeneutic of suspicion” is most in play. Every culture and tradition needs this hermeneutic so as not to begin to overlook, even if inadvertently, the powerless and disadvantaged. Every culture and tradition has its blind spots, and a voice of critique or opposition can serve to clarify and broaden its vision. Assessing when that opposition goes beyond helpful to counterproductive is always a judgment call, but a society without such a voice lacks access to the life-giving, justice-serving, prophetic word.

One aspect of Marian spirituality the feminist sources (not those sources alone, but those in particular) keep to the fore is the sense of Mary as one of us, as one with whom we can identify because she has fully shared our human...
lot, even to the worst of suffering and sorrow. A comparison of two titles helps to illustrate the point. The US bishops’ document on Mary is Behold Your Mother—a sound title, a biblical phrase (Jn 19:27), and yet, one’s mother is still one’s mother. Somehow a whole world of possibility for close relationship with Mary is opened up with a different perspective: Truly Our Sister, the marvelous title of Elizabeth A. Johnson’s book.

It is interesting to observe the way some concerns shared by feminists and others were addressed within a decade of the Council’s close by Paul VI in his apostolic exhortation, Marialis Cultus, in particular in the section on anthropological guidelines (34-37). This section speaks of the contrast between advances in our understanding of the human person and society on the one hand and “a certain type of devotional literature” on the other; what Pope Paul says is that the latter must change in light of the former (34). Noting that women today seek and expect to exercise “decision-making power in the affairs of the community,” he recalls Mary’s “dialogue with God” and “her active and responsible consent” in a decision impacting the history of humanity.7 He insists her choice of virginity was for the sake of God’s plan for her and in no way rejects the values of married life and love. He refers to certain lines in the Magnificat to show Mary as “far from being a timidly submissive woman” but rather one who did not hesitate to proclaim that God vindicates the humble and the oppressed, and removes the powerful people of this world from their privileged positions” (cf. Lk 1:51–53). That she, just as so many others throughout history and today, experienced exile, poverty, and suffering “cannot escape the attention of those who wish to support, with the Gospel spirit, the liberating energies of man and of society.” He also describes her as a woman concerned not only for her son, Jesus, but for his mission and his disciples; she was “a woman whose action helped to strengthen the apostolic community’s faith in Christ.” Pope Paul concludes this section by writing:

These are but examples, but examples which show clearly that the figure of the Blessed Virgin does not disillusion any of the profound expectations of the men and women of our time but offers them the perfect model of the disciple of the Lord: the disciple who builds up the earthly and temporal city while being a diligent pilgrim towards the heavenly and eternal city; the disciple who works for that justice which sets free the oppressed and for that charity which assists the needy; but above all, the disciple who is the active witness of that love which builds up Christ in people’s hearts.

Again, all of these observations make fruitful points for reflection by lay ecclesial ministers and for application in their ministries.

**Protestant**

In the context of some ecumenical relationships or dialogues even today, “Mary” may still be a divisive issue, but the situation has been changing. What Vatican II said about Mary helped clear away the traditional Protestant fear that Catholics worship Mary or give her too great a role in the work of salvation. The council affirmed that “the Blessed Virgin is invoked in the church under the titles of Advocate, Helper, Benefactress, and Mediatrix,” but then came a significant and clarifying sentence: “This, however, is so understood that it neither takes away anything from nor adds anything to the dignity and efficacy of Christ the one Mediator” (LG 62). With that clear affirmation of the sole efficacy of Christ in the work of salvation, Protestants began to feel they had a basis for conversation with Catholics.

Another factor has been a growing awareness among Protestants of all kinds that their traditional approach to Mary has been questionable. Mary does have a role in the gospels, and to ignore it is, actually, unbiblical. Attention to the verse “Surely, from now on all generations will call me blessed” (Lk 1:48b) has begun to raise the question

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7  Paul VI, 37. All citations in the remainder of this paragraph are from Marialis Cultus, 37.
among some Protestants as to why they do not more evidently and readily do what the verse says in biblical study, theological reflection, devotional practice, and public worship. And so, recent years have seen a growing Protestant body of publications dealing with Mary. The very fact of this interest can be instructive for Catholic lay ecclesial ministers who may have a residual sense that making a place for Mary in their spirituality or ministry is somehow unconciliar and will create an ecumenical barrier; on the contrary, it may be a gift in ecumenical dialogue and an aid in strengthening ecumenical ties.

Practices for Beginning or Deepening a Marian Spirituality

It is one thing to point to various sources useful for cultivating a Marian spirituality; it is another thing actually to cultivate it. In this section we look at four ways of doing so.

Theological Reflection

The basic way proposed here for incorporating a Marian spirituality in the practice of lay ecclesial ministry is through theological reflection, a practice Co-Workers repeatedly recommends for lay ecclesial ministers. Any of the well-known methods can be adopted or adapted—including, I would suggest, the daily examen of consciousness—to help one relate “Mary” and one’s “ministerial practice” in enriching ways. When lay ecclesial ministers engage in theological reflection on their day or week in ministry, they look for resonances between their experience and Christian tradition and revelation. When their minds and imaginations have been thus nourished by the practices and the sources of a Marian spirituality, then the fruits of that practice are available to speak to that ministerial experience and help illuminate it. They become better equipped and able to see God’s presence and action in their ministerial life through a Marian lens and to shape their ministerial hopes and efforts to conform to God’s purposes and collaborate in God’s work as faithfully as Mary did.

Meditation on the Word of God

The scriptural passages on Mary are an essential resource and for the purposes of spiritual formation can be used with any method of praying with scripture. One such method is lectio divina, in use since the early church and frequently recommended by Pope Benedict XVI. In this approach, the words of the biblical passage speak to one’s mind and heart as one quietly repeats and ponders them, occasionally turning to God in prayer, perhaps being led into wordless contemplation. This practice opens a person of faith to the Spirit of God through the inspired word of God, allowing a gradual transformation to take place which can then bear fruit in one’s life and ministry. Another method is an Ignatian way of reflecting on biblical passages, incorporating an active use of one’s “baptized” imagination to enter into the biblical scene by becoming a participant in the story—sometimes simply being there or sometimes taking an active part by being spoken to or speaking and by responding to or initiating some action. Once again, the practice opens persons to the working of God’s Spirit using the faculty of imagination, and when the gospel scene used for prayer includes Mary, their understanding of and relationship with her can be enhanced.

The Rosary

The rosary, one of the most widely used devotional practices of the second millennium, saw a certain decline in use in those immediately postconciliar years but more recently is the subject of renewed interest. Best understood

and practiced as a contemplative form of prayer, it can be very fruitful for theological reflection on ministry. Here are two ways of doing this.

The traditional mysteries (the joyful, sorrowful, and glorious mysteries, accompanied now by the mysteries of light) can serve as a framework for meditation on one’s ministry. One might find that while meditating on these mysteries, an event from the ministerial day comes to mind—a meeting or conversation, a challenge or joy or question. In the prayerful juxtaposition of the two realities, the rosary mysteries might suggest a way of seeing more deeply into or feeling differently about the event, shedding some gospel light on it, and inviting a response of faith.

Perhaps a lay ecclesial minister feels some apprehension or resentment at having been given responsibility for a significant new ministerial task; this may appear in a different light when viewed through the lens of the mystery of the Annunciation and Mary’s response to Gabriel’s words. A hurtful, cutting remark spoken by another might resonate differently as one watches in prayer Christ being scourged with whips or crowned with thorns and mocked by soldiers. If one were suffering from a sense of loss, anger, or defeat at the failure or even sabotage of a major ministry project dear to one’s heart, consider how the power of the paschal mystery could be at work if today one meditated on the experience in light of Jesus’ passion, crucifixion, and death, and tomorrow in light of his resurrection. Or if one seeks renewed energy or perhaps new boldness in ministry, this can be pondered and prayed for when reflecting on the sending of the Holy Spirit. Indeed, the more one continues with this practice, the more it may emerge that even unlikely juxtapositions of rosary mysteries and pastoral experiences can surprisingly prove revealing, enlightening, consoling, and encouraging.

A second way to use the rosary follows a suggestion made by the US Catholic bishops in Behold Your Mother. They wrote, “Besides the precise rosary pattern long known to Catholics, we can freely experiment. New sets of mysteries are possible.” John Paul II did precisely this in developing the five mysteries of light, proposed and described in his apostolic letter on the rosary.11

What if lay ecclesial ministers did the same for their own ministry? Are there four or five or six (the exact number is not sacrosanct) passages from the scriptures that could be uniquely relevant? A catechetical minister might choose, for example, Jesus as a boy in the temple listening to and questioning the teachers (Lk 2:46–47, on being a student), Mary who “kept all these things and pondered them in her heart” (Lk 2:19,51, on learning from experience), the beatitudes (Mt 5:1 ff., Jesus’ core message), the parable of the sower (Mk 4:1 ff., the diversity of those who hear and respond to the message), the washing of the disciples’ feet (Jn 13:1–17, on teaching by example), and the Emmaus story (Lk 24:13–35, on engaging learners at the critical point of their experience and illuminating that experience scripturally and christologically). Whatever one’s particular ministry, it could be a revealing spiritual exercise to search the scriptures for appropriate and life-giving passages and then a fruitful spiritual practice to use those passages, with the meditative technique of the rosary, to let the word of God provide light and strength for one’s ministry.

A Marianist Method

Religious communities whose charism is in some way linked with Mary may have resources applicable or adaptable for the spirituality of lay ecclesial ministers. I teach at the University of Dayton, a Catholic university founded and operated by the Marianists (The Society of Mary, S.M.), and I have learned to appreciate the charism of this

10 US Catholic Bishops, Behold Your Mother, 97.
11 John Paul II, Rosarium Virginis Mariae, 19 and 21.
community. Let me offer just one example of a Marianist method that can speak to the condition of those serving in ministry.

Quentin Hakenewerth, S.M., wrote *A Manual of Marianist Spirituality* for persons considering or in process of becoming Marianists, but most of his teaching and suggestions are useful for anyone seeking to give a Marian dimension to their Christian calling or ministerial life. His chapter on “Going Beyond Mediocrity: ‘Purification,’” for example, is an encouragement not to be held back by any obstacle that may keep us from giving our all to Christ, as may happen through settling for what is routine, letting “good enough” be good enough, or starting that slide into cynicism—all dangers that long-term lay ecclesial ministers may face. He offers an image for dealing with such obstacles.

The image comes from Blessed William Joseph Chaminade, founder of the Marianists. Chaminade compares himself to “a quiet brook that, encountering an obstacle, makes no effort to remove it. It is the obstacle itself that causes the stream to grow wider and deeper until it overflows the obstacle and continues on its way. That is the way of purification.” This Marianist way of dealing with an obstacle in ministry is not to make strenuous efforts to move it, get rid of it, or avoid it; “rather, we grow in virtue until we ‘overflow’ it.” A lay ecclesial minister could think what that might mean for an obstacle one is currently facing. What or who is the obstacle? What kind of strength or virtue would, if it grew, have the capacity (that is to say, build within one the capacity) not to avoid or even precisely to overcome the obstacle but simply to overflow it?

Hakenewerth gives six examples of the kinds of obstacles one might face and how to deal with each. These obstacles include having doubts and uncertainty, limits/weaknesses, inclinations to egoism, opposition/contrarieties, suggestions to quit, and temptations. Other chapters of the book describe additional practices that could foster a Marianist spirituality within those who serve in lay ecclesial ministry.

**Conclusion**

In the postconciliar era, the church seemed to need a pause or a break from the intensity and at times excesses of its preconciliar Marian devotion. In our post-postconciliar era, and in response to the US bishops’ call to cultivate “a Marian spirituality,” let us realize and accept that the time has come again for a ready spirit of openness to this woman, the Mother of God, Mother of the church, our mother and sister. Whether as lay ecclesial ministers, formation directors, spiritual directors or formators, let us listen and learn from what she can say to us about loving and understanding her Son, trusting and following him without reserve, and serving him, his people, and his mission in the church and the world today.

**Bibliography**


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13 Hakenewerth, 57.
14 Hakenewerth, 57–60.


*Scriptural*


*Magisterial*


Hispanic


Devotional


Feminist


Protestant/Ecumenical


Theological Reflection


A variety of other resources can be found at The Marian Page of The Marian Library/International Marian Research Institute, University of Dayton, at [http://campus.udayton.edu/mary/index.html](http://campus.udayton.edu/mary/index.html).