Becoming Christian in the “School of Mary”

Francis Caponi, O.S.A.

In this essay, the author examines several understandings of Mary, the Mother of Jesus. He plumbs their theological richness and their value for Christian formation and the life of faith.

A prominent theme in Roman Catholic and Orthodox theology, and a nascent one within contemporary Protestant theology, is the vivid role which the mother of Jesus can play in the process of becoming Christian. The interested inquirer, the catechumen entering into the mystery of new life, and baptized believers seeking a deeper commitment to Jesus Christ, can all receive encouragement and guidance through meditation on, and imitation of, the mother of Jesus Christ. Much of the Christian tradition regards attention to “the Marian dimension of the life of a disciple of Christ” (*Redemptoris Mater*, 45) as making an integral contribution towards “living for God in Christ Jesus” (Rom 6:11). This essay will explore, within an ecumenical context, the theological roots of “the contemplation of Christ at the school of Mary” (*Ecclesia de Eucharistia*, 7), and some of the practical benefits believers may gain from such a Marian “apprenticeship.”

Mary and Christ

Christians from a range of traditions have observed that there is coherence of Christian vision and life, the “organic unity, the ‘symphony’ of truth, the
central reference of which is Jesus Christ” (Ratzinger: III.2.b), exemplified by Marian theology and devotion. In the Roman Catholic perspective, Mary is the living moment in which Christian claims about sin and grace, service and prayer, faith and hope, are most powerfully realized, precisely because Mary is utterly transparent to Jesus Christ. In his apostolic exhortation *Marialis Cultus*, Paul VI teaches that “in the Virgin Mary everything is relative to Christ and dependent upon him,” and it is this focus which gives Marian doctrine and cult its “great pastoral effectiveness and constitutes a force for renewing Christian living” (25, see also *Lumen Gentium*, 65). The Pope gives powerful expression to Mary’s ministry of forming the Christian faithful:

Devotion to the Mother of the Lord becomes for the faithful an opportunity for growing in divine grace, and this is the ultimate aim of all pastoral activity. For it is impossible to honor her who is “full of grace” (Luke 1:28) without thereby honoring in oneself the state of grace, which is friendship with God, communion with him and the indwelling of the Holy Spirit. It is this divine grace which takes possession of the whole man and conforms him to the image of the Son of God (cf. Rom. 8:29; Col. 1:18). The Catholic Church, endowed with centuries of experience, recognizes in devotion to the Blessed Virgin a powerful aid for man as he strives for fulfillment. Mary, the New Woman, stands at the side of Christ, the New Man, within whose mystery the mystery of man alone finds true light; she is given to us as a pledge and guarantee that God’s plan in Christ for the salvation of the whole man has already achieved realization in a creature: in her. (*Marialis Cultus*, 57)

This perspective on Mary as the teacher of Christians is present in other (non-Roman Catholic) communities. Anglican theologian John Macquarrie stresses the theological centrality of Mary: “Mariology is so far from being peripheral that it is rather the meeting place for a great many Christian doctrines, almost, one might say, like Crewe junction on the British railway system, the place where a great many lines meet and connections are made. Anthropology, christology, ecclesiology, hamartiology, soteriology-these are among the doctrines which all touch on Mariology” (Macquarrie, 58–59; also 92, 102, 112–14). The theology of Mary will “throw new light on the truths from which it had been derived and will thereby strengthen the coherence and unity of the many elements which together constitute the Christian faith” (Macquarrie, 59). And the Eastern traditions, which “pay high tribute, in beautiful hymns of praise, to Mary ever Virgin” (*Unitatis Redintegratio*, 15), also hold that “the manner by which we approach the question of the person and vocation of Mary, the Theotokos, is intimately related to our approach to the gospel and the church as well as salvation, eschatology, the communion of saints, and what it means to be a human person” (Fitzgerald, 81).
Recently, real recognition has been given in many Protestant circles of the loss sustained to their christology, ecclesiology, and worship by the neglect of Mary. Lutheran theologian Robert Jenson focuses on the ecclesial import of Mary, and advocates a Protestant recovery of the tradition of Marian prayer (Jenson, 56). Another Lutheran theologian, David Yeago, invokes the long tradition of “Marian consciousness” in the church, and calls upon Protestants to recognize and reclaim, on the basis of Scripture, the truth that every Christian’s relationship to Jesus Christ contains a relationship to Mary (Yeago, 63). Even further, he argues that Scripture supports the view that “Mary is present to the church and to the believer both as the proto-type and model of the church and the believer, and also as an active agent of the formation of the church and the believer” (Yeago, 59).

Mary’s Consent

Of course, deep differences remain among Christian approaches to the Blessed Mother. Perhaps most significant, Roman Catholic, Orthodox, and Anglican theologies of grace attach tremendous significance to the Biblical, patristic, and medieval teaching of Mary’s grace-enabled cooperation with the divine plan of salvation. For these traditions, Mary’s response to Gabriel (Luke 1:38) attests to the possibility of real active human cooperation in salvation. John Newman emphasized the antiquity of this perspective:

St. Justin, St. Irenaeus, and others, had distinctly laid it down, that she not only had an office, but bore a part, and was a voluntary agent, in the actual process of the redemption, as Eve had been instrumental and responsible in Adam’s fall (415).

This common theme is given magisterial cast by the Second Vatican Council, which teaches the “subordinate cooperation” of Mary with God:

For no creature could ever be counted as equal with the Incarnate Word and Redeemer. Just as the priesthood of Christ is shared in various ways both by the ministers and by the faithful, and as the one goodness of God is really communicated in different ways to His creatures, so also the unique mediation of the Redeemer does not exclude but rather gives rise to a manifold cooperation which is but a sharing in this one source. The Church does not hesitate to profess this subordinate role of Mary. It knows it through unflagging experience of it and commends it to the hearts of the faithful, so that encouraged by this maternal help they may the more intimately adhere to the Mediator and Redeemer (Lumen Gentium, 62).
However, this theme remains neuralgic for most Protestants (Daniélou, 124–25; Barth, 146; Concordia, 83–106). Even here, though, new possibilities of rapprochement appear. Yeago observes that Mary’s maternity is dramatically recounted by the Bible in a narrative form which stresses her personal role as one addressed by God, one to whom a promise is made, one in whom faith is evoked, and one who freely consents (66). Though a “thorny matter” for Protestants, Yeago insists that this Scriptural portrayal supports the active participation of Mary in the formation of a Christian. This formative agency is embodied in the Magnificat. He writes: “Just as a mother teaches her children by precept and example the ways of the family, and prepares them to live well in the surrounding human community, so Mary teaches the church and all the faithful the ways of God’s household and forms them so that they may live well in the environment of his inbreaking reign in Jesus Christ” (78). Yeago uses the language of election and promise to claim that Mary’s election and the gift of God’s unmerited grace do not preclude an active role for the Blessed Mother in the mystery of divine Incarnation and human salvation.

**Curriculum of the Christian Faithful**

Enough of an ecumenical framework exists to suggest that the commitment of all the Christian faithful can be deepened by contemplation of Mary’s unique call and response, as these take shape in the concrete events of her life presented in Scripture. Only a few of these instructive features can be considered here.

**A People of Constant Thanks**

To honor Mary as chosen by God and saved in Christ is to sharpen our gratitude for our own salvation, and to recognize the source and purpose of that salvation. Supported by grace at every point, Mary is the quintessential singer of God’s praise, as Luther asserts: “The tender mother of Christ . . . teaches us with her words and by the example of her experience, how to know, love, and praise God” (1955: 301). Reflection on Mary’s life can awaken the mind and senses to the daily, often unnoticed condescension of God to us. A vivid awareness of God’s goodness—“He has done great things for me” (Luke 1:49)—is the indispensable foundation for a life of constant thanks modeled by Mary’s ever-grateful response.

**A people of holy heart**

The Christian life is a constant engagement with sin. We are creatures replete with faults-beings who, as Hamlet observed, have more offenses at our beck than
we have “thoughts to put them in, imagination to give them shape, or time to act
them in.” Why, then, would we enroll ourselves in the school of Mary, a sinless
pedagogue? Is not Mary’s sinlessness an obstacle to a full Christian apprentice-
ship? In North American culture, in which people tend to trust experts who show
us a common, human face, why would anyone seek guidance from a woman who,
to all appearances, could only stare at us politely but blankly when we spoke to
her of our lust, greed, ambition, prejudice, and vanity? How can she who was
without sin, be imitated by fellows such as us, “crawling between earth and
heaven”?

Hans Urs von Balthasar gives us another perspective: “[H]er privilege . . .
only deepens her solidarity with mankind. Sin brings about isolation and
thwarts effective solidarity . . . whereas innocence makes it possible to be open to suffering
with others and to be ready, in love, to embrace such suffering. (1993:324). The truth is that
Mary’s sinlessness makes her more accessible to us, not less.

In this light, we can also say that Mary’s personal lack of sin is not the same thing as
ignorance of sin, no more than Jesus’ lack of sin exempted him from its intimate embrace. Once
more, Mary has something to teach us about Christ: “For our sake he made him to be sin who
did not know sin, so that we might become the righteousness of God in him” (II Cor 5:21). Inno-
cence knows sin best. Mary knows sin, and she
labors under no misapprehensions about its na-
ture and force. Pregnant before marriage, Mary
entertained no hopes that her family and friends
would understand, that people, because they are basically good, would see past
her apparent sin and dishonor and accept her word that she bore within her the
child of the Spirit. The threat was real, the danger mortal, and her hope placed in
God alone, that He who had begun this mighty work would provide for its com-
pletion. So, too, standing beneath the cross, Mary has no shield from the effects of
sin, no deception with which to deflect the horror of the scene. Her flesh and
blood crucified, and no fantasies of revenge to give her succor; the impossible
son of impossible grace become a roadside attraction, and Mary has only the
words of the angel, now seemingly ancient, to hold her up: “Nothing will be im-
possible for God” (Luke 1:37). Mary is completely vulnerable, absolutely naked
before the wrath of a fallen world, not a single good, strong sin to grab hold of in
the roaring tide. We who sin know something about denying its truth and escap-
ing its scourge: Mary meets it full on because of her love for Christ. She knows
the hardness of the Way as no sinner ever has. She has much to teach us about the cost of discipleship.

**A Christ-like people**

Mary’s free cooperation with the divine plan of salvation bears visible fruit in the imitation of her son. In giving God thanks, in visiting those in need, in joining in the celebrations of sinners, and in offering the ministry of comfort to the dying, she lives a life of Christian discipleship. The good news of Jesus Christ is that the light comes to the darkness (John 1:9), the greater comes to the lesser, the high comes to the low, the holy reaches down to the level of the sinner. God who creates the universe becomes part of the earth, “taking the form of a slave, coming in human likeness; and found human in appearance, he humbled himself, becoming obedient to death, even death on a cross” (Phil 2:7-8). Christ, who is eternal, drinks from the bitter cup of death for the sake of sinners (Rom 5:6-8). And Mary’s life shows her to be the first and the greatest of Christ’s disciples, because even before Christ is born, she is living this very gospel kenosis of the faithful disciple. This is manifest in her visitation to Elizabeth (Luke 1:39-56). On hearing of her cousin’s pregnancy, Mary immediately goes to visit her. Mary, the greater, goes to Elizabeth, the lesser, out of love and for the sake of service. In the Visitation, Mary imitates the Christ she carries, the Christ who did not wait for us to find him but came in search of us (Luke 15:4-6). Thus is Mary’s discipleship a school for souls, teaching us that we are called to nothing less than Christ-like lives, and given nothing less than the power of Christ to make our discipleship possible. The image of our greatest sister, Theotokos, Gate of Heaven, Queen of Angels, hustling through the hill country of Judea, with a sore back and morning sickness, just to bring a little joy and comfort to her cousin, can serve as a potent salve to the open wounds of pride and vanity which disfigure within us the image of the one who came, not to be served, but to serve (Mark 10:45).

**A People of the Eucharist**

Pope John Paul II has written with exceptional richness on the theme of Mary as a woman of the Eucharist. Present among the apostolic community who “devoted themselves with one accord to prayer” (Acts 1:14) and who “devoted themselves to the teaching of the apostles and to the communal life, to the breaking of the bread and to the prayers” (Acts 2:42), Mary “must have been present at the eucharistic celebrations of the first generation of Christians” (Ecclesia de Eucharistia, 53). However, Mary’s relationship to the Eucharist precedes the celebrations of the first community. “If the Eucharist is a mystery of faith which so greatly transcends our understanding as to call for sheer abandonment to the word of God, then there can be no one like Mary to act as our support and guide in acquiring this disposition” (Ecclesia de Eucharistia, 54). In the offer of her virginal womb for the Incarnation of God’s Word, Mary conceived the Son of
God in the physical reality of his body and blood, anticipating the reception of the Eucharist by the faithful. Her *fiat* anticipates our “Amen.” The joy of Elizabeth and John at the visitation of the pregnant Mary anticipates the reverence of the faithful before the tabernacle. And in the Magnificat, Mary’s song reflects the eschatological tension of the Eucharist, the coming of the Son of God in bread and wine which foretells that final coming in which arrogant power will be broken and the hungry nourished by Christ. “The Eucharist has been given to us so that our life, like that of Mary, may become completely a Magnificat” (*Ecclesia de Eucharistia*, 58). Perhaps a few more words may be added to the Pope’s probing reflections on this theme. For Catholics, each time we celebrate Mass, bread and wine become the body and blood of Christ. But this is not exactly true, for it is not simply bread and wine that are transformed.

If we are honest, we will admit that it is really bad bread, and pretty awful wine, which become the body and blood of Christ. No one in the history of the world has ever walked into a bakery and asked, “Do you have any of the stuff they use at Mass?” No restaurant of even moderate means would permit altar wine on its tables. Human skill in the kitchen and the vineyard does not make bread and wine into the body and blood of Christ. The Holy Spirit, greeted by the humble, flawed faith of the assembly, takes this less-than-ordinary bread and wine and brings forth in them what no human skill could produce, what no human heart could dare dream. The mystery of the Eucharist is the mystery of the humble made great by God. Every Mass is a celebration that God has “lifted up the lowly” (Luke 1:52). Just so is it with Mary. She is the woman of the Eucharist because she is the perfect image and prophecy of what God brings about in every Mass. Mary, a simple girl of few means and less education, without political standing or religious influence, is raised by God to the dignity of Theotokos, the God-Bearer. This is not her doing, but is the gift of God (Eph 2:8-9). Contemplation of what God wrought in her makes clear what He brings about in every celebration of the Eucharist, and what he is doing in the life of every Christian: making us God-Bearers. Mary’s life is a prophecy of the Eucharist, a figure of the lowly bread and wine transformed, and a type of the disciple transfigured by the bodily reception of the Lord. Her witness is a powerful aid for the faithful as they strive to open themselves more fully to the real presence of Christ in the unprepossessing colleague, the disappointing friend, the uneducated neighbor, the sibling whose life has been pierced by drugs, the child whose life has been worn down by failure.
Conclusion

There is only one *Theotokos*, yet all Christians are called to be God-bearers. There is only one *Fiat*, yet all the faithful are called to give constant and ever-deeper assent to the will of God. There is only one *Mater Ecclesiae*, yet all the followers of Christ, as their conversion takes deeper root and blossoms more fully in faith, hope, and love, experience the divine call to give birth to praise and powerful witness.

Called by God, chosen for Christ, strengthened for discipleship, supported in suffering, strong in hope, and brought by the Father to His side, Mary is the Christian master from whom we lesser apprentices of the Lord can learn the basic skills of discipleship: complete trust, constant thanks, unsentimental service, compassionate yet uncompromising honesty about sin, and the humble posture of the unworthy herald whose greatness is given by Another. Mary’s single, simple message—“Do whatever he tells you” (John 2:5)—proclaimed faithfully and heartily in joy and strife, has the unexpected, stunning effect of turning us from mere messengers into tabernacles, in imitation of her who was his first herald, his first temple, his first and finest follower.

References

All quotations from official Church documents, unless otherwise noted, are taken from the official website of the Holy See: www.vatican.va.


