

Mary: Mother And Model

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Francis, like all Medieval Christians, had a special devotion to Mary, the mother of Jesus. Francis' devotion to her was, according to his earliest biographer, Thomas of Celano, "inexpressible," for "it was she who made the Lord of majesty our brother" (2 *Celano*, 198). In other words, the humanity of Jesus, which was so central to Francis' experience came through Mary. So great was his love for her that he composed a poetic litany, "The Salutation of the Blessed Virgin Mary" in her honor. Like all Christians at the time, Francis acknowledged Mary as Mother of God, Mother of Christians and model for the Christian life. In addition, almost as one ahead of his time, he anticipates the theology of the Second Vatican Council and speaks of Mary as "the Church." These are the three powerful images of Mary one finds in Scripture.

What does it mean to speak of Mary as Mother of Christ and of Christians? In the Gospel of John, Mary appears only twice (at the wedding at Cana and at the foot of the Cross), and is never identified by name; yet it is here that we get the clearest picture of Mary as Mother. Though based on historical events, the Gospel of John is a very symbolic Gospel. For example, the Gospel opens with the words "in the beginning," which calls to mind the Creation story of Genesis. John is drawing a parallel between the Creation story of Genesis and the New Creation brought about by Jesus. Jesus can only create anew because he is the Word made Flesh: the same Word through which the Old Creation came to be is now a human being, bringing about the New Creation. Hence, John will continually contrast the old with the new. The first Creation took seven days, so, too, the second Creation. After the parallel "In the beginning," John counts off seven days (1:19, 1:29, 1:35, 1:43, and 2:1) until Jesus produces his first sign of the New Creation, the transformation of water into wine. It is in the first verse of this scene that Mary is introduced.

Mary is not mentioned by name; she is simply called "Jesus' mother." Jesus has done nothing extraordinary to this point, yet Mary has glimmers of his possibilities and presents him with her simple request: "They have no wine." Jesus' response to her has puzzled Christians for centuries: "Woman, why do you involve me? My hour is not yet here." Some have wondered why Jesus spoke so "harshly" to her. However, Jesus also calls her "Woman" when he is dying on the Cross, hardly a time he would speak harshly. It would seem, therefore, that this is not a "put down." Once we understand the structure of the Gospel of John, the matter becomes clear. We are at the beginning of a New Creation. In Genesis (the Old Creation), who was called "woman?" Eve, the mother of all the living. John here presents the Woman of the New Creation as present at the very beginning of Jesus' public ministry. It is no wonder that the early Church Fathers, drawing upon the Pauline theme of Jesus as the New Adam, also drew upon the Johannine Gospel here and presented Mary as the New Eve.

When Jesus transforms the water into wine (the Eucharistic imagery of the New Creation), and the headwaiter exclaims that the groom has saved the best wine for last, this is the proclamation that the New Creation will far surpass the first. This is the first work, the first “sign” of the New Creation. Through Eve, the Old Adam sinned and began the destruction of the Old Creation; now through the instigation of the New Eve, the New Adam begins the transforming work of the New Creation.

The next scene in which Mary appears is at the foot of the Cross. His hour has finally arrived and she is present. Mary is with the “beloved disciple,” who in John’s Gospel is the symbol for the “perfect disciple.” He represents us. It is this disciple who lays his head on Jesus’ breast at the last Supper (indicative of intimacy with Jesus) and who is the first apostle to arrive at the Empty Tomb on Easter Sunday (indicating coming to faith in the Risen Lord). It is this “ideal disciple” who is accompanied by Mary to the Crucifixion.

“Woman,” Jesus says, “behold your son.” Then the clincher: “Son, behold your mother.” And from that moment on, the beloved disciple, the ideal disciple, took Mary as his own mother. Just as the Woman of Genesis, the first Eve, was the mother of all humanity, the Woman of John’s Gospel, the New Eve, is mother to all Christians, given to us by Jesus himself. How are we to understand Mary’s continuing maternal role? If Mary is the Mother of Jesus on earth, and we are members of that body, then Mary, as Mother of Christ, is mother also of Christians and of the Church.

In the Gospel of Luke, and its sequel, the Acts of the Apostles, we find the clearest picture of Mary as the model Christian disciple and as the personification of the People of God, both Israel and the Church. Three sections of Luke’s writings portray Mary as the prototype of the Christian disciple and the personification of the People of God: the infancy narratives, the section where Jesus’ mother and brothers come to see him (Luke 8: 19-21), and in the Upper Room (Acts 1:14), awaiting Pentecost.



In the Infancy narratives, we have the scenes of the Annunciation, the Visitation, the Nativity, the Presentation, and the Finding of Jesus in the Temple. These contain the richest Mariological content of the Gospel. In the Annunciation, the Angel Gabriel appears to Mary to tell her that she is to become the mother of the long-awaited Messiah. The angel’s first word of greeting, “Hail,” (or “Rejoice”) is already packed with meaning. In the Greek Old Testament, the verb form of this word (to hail) is used about 20 times, each time designating a special saving act on God’s part. The use here signals the reader (already familiar with the Old Testament) that God is about to do something terrific. The actual word “hail” is used in the Old Testament four times, three of which are addressed to the “Daughter of Zion,” the female personification of God’s Chosen People. The meaning is clear: Mary is the Daughter of Zion. She is God’s People Israel.

The angel then tells her she is to bear the Messiah, who will inherit the throne of his father David. When Mary questions him, not from lack of faith, but because she is a virgin, Gabriel tells her that the Holy Spirit will overshadow her and so the child will be called the Son of God. The confession of faith that Jesus is son of David according to the flesh and Son of God according to the Spirit is one of the earliest Christian creeds (Romans 1:3). By placing this confession of faith on the angel's lips, and through Mary's response, "Be it done to me according to your word," Mary becomes the first (and thus "prototypical," or model) Christian disciple. She has heard the Word of God, and has received (and kept) it. The overshadowing by the Holy Spirit implies that Mary is the new Ark of the Covenant, the Holy of Holies, which the Most High overshadows as in the cloud at Mount Sinai and in which he dwells. She is the Temple.

Yet, response is never once and for all; it must be continual. In each succeeding section of the Infancy narratives, Mary is presented again and again with testimony that God is doing something extraordinary: Elizabeth proclaims, "Blessed is the fruit of your womb;" the shepherds come to do homage; Simeon prophesies that the child will be the "rise and fall of many in Israel;" and when Mary finds Jesus in the Temple, Jesus responds that he must be about his Father's business. And though she may not fully understand, Mary continually receives the word, and "keeps these things in her heart." To keep in the heart means to "puzzle over," to meditate upon. Mary does not simply hear and forget; she continually reflects on these things in her heart, allowing them to sink to the center of her being.

The final scene in which Luke gives us a picture of Mary is that of her present in the Upper Room, praying with the apostles and the rest of the disciples, awaiting the descent of the Holy Spirit. Here we have a very nice picture of the model Christian disciple praying with the whole Church; indeed, she is already the spouse of the Holy Spirit, something which the whole Church is about to share. Perhaps this is why after the Holy Spirit comes, Luke does not mention Mary again; her role becomes the role of the Church.



Mary, then, is at the hinge of history; indeed, with Jesus, she is the hinge of history. Not only in her own person is she a true disciple, but Luke suggests that she is the symbol and model for all true believers, both of the Old and the New Covenants. Indeed, she symbolizes and personifies the entire People of God, Israel and the Church. When we imitate her, not superficially, but in the depths of our being, when we receive the word of God and keep it in our hearts, putting it into action, we become true disciples.

Francis, though not a theologian, seems to embrace this rich theology. Mary is the mother of Jesus and the mother of Christians. In a very special way, she is mother of the Franciscan family. She is the model for Christians, and thus for Franciscans, who are called to be “mother and brother and sister” to Jesus. And she is, in Francis’ own words, “the virgin made church.”

Any discussion of devotion to Mary in a Franciscan context would be incomplete without mentioning two very important Franciscan contributions to Marian devotion and theology. The first is the *Franciscan Crown*. While most Catholics are familiar with the Dominican Rosary (Joyful, Sorrowful, Glorious, Luminous Mysteries), many are not so familiar with the *Franciscan Crown Rosary*. The story goes that in 1422, a young man who used to adorn a statue of Mary with a wreath of flowers every day was upset that he was unable to do so now that he had entered the friary. The story says that Mary appeared to him and asked him to give her a crown of flowers in the form of reciting seven decades of Hail Marys in honor of her seven joys: the Annunciation, the visit to Elizabeth, the Nativity, the adoration of the Magi, finding Jesus in the Temple, experiencing the Risen Jesus on Easter, and her Assumption. Soon this devotion spread through the Franciscan family. Later a custom developed of following the seven decades with two Hail Marys in honor of the seventy-two years that legend has it Mary lived on earth, and adding one Our Father and Hail Mary for the intention of the pope.

The second Franciscan contribution is to Marian doctrine. For centuries, the question of whether Mary was conceived without Original Sin was bantered about by theologians. The leading theologians of the Church, including Bernard of Clairvaux, Thomas Aquinas and Bonaventure, had resisted this doctrine, fearing that it would mean that Mary had no need of Christ, and thus Christ would not be savior of *everyone*. It was a Franciscan theologian, Blessed John Duns Scotus, who offered this solution: Mary was saved from Original Sin *in anticipation* of the sacrifice of Christ on the Cross. In other words, Mary did need Christ, though it was applied to her before the actual fact of the Death and Resurrection. Duns Scotus paved the way for the Church to proclaim the dogma of the Immaculate Conception (promulgated by a Secular Franciscan, Blessed Pope Pius IX, in 1850) in such a way that it did not detract from the salvific work of Christ.



As should be clear, there is a deep connection of the Franciscan Family to Mary. For the most part, Franciscans simply share in the general devotion to and belief about Mary that all Catholics hold. In a special way, Mary is seen as the protectress of the Family (“She was embraced by Francis with indescribable love and declared the protectress and advocate of his family” [*The Rule of the Secular Franciscan Order*, article #9]), and a model for Franciscan life. And Franciscans have added to the wealth of Mariological doctrine and devotion through the *Franciscan Crown Rosary* and the theology of Duns Scotus. Now let us follow the instructions of the Blessed Mother at Cana and “do what he [her Son, Jesus] tells you.”