

THE MOTHER OF JESUS IN SCRIPTURE AND IN THE CHURCH

Mary, the mother of Jesus (Mark 6:8; Matthew 13:55; Acts 1:4) does not figure largely in the New Testament writings. The testimonies of faith in her regard take on greater extent and depth with the growing interest in the life of Jesus, his death and resurrection being the event first and primarily proclaimed in Scripture. Yet, there is no reason to ignore her existence and importance simply because of often-erroneous perceptions of Catholic excesses. An objective study reveals that she has much to teach any Christian who desires to be a sincere follower and disciple of her Son.

In the letters of Paul, which are earlier than the gospels, Mary is mentioned only in Galatians 4:4. But the important truth is already uttered here. Paul speaks of the Messiah by speaking of Mary, though without mentioning her name: "But when the time had fully come, God sent forth his Son, born of a woman, born under the law." According to this text, Mary is the place in which the Son of God entered human history. The birth from a woman guarantees the true humanity and historicity of the crucified and risen Lord whom Paul preaches, and excludes all "spiritualizing" tendencies.

When Christians began to have recourse to the life and actions of Jesus before his death and resurrection, the mother of Jesus who was part of his life began to play a greater role. This new interest was satisfied most fully in the gospels of Matthew and Luke (about A.D. 80), which narrate the conception and birth of Jesus. They do not confine themselves like Mark to scenes from the public life of Jesus.

According to the gospel of Mark (3:20f; 3:31-35), Jesus' relatives, and also his mother -- whose participation, however, was merely that of a silent bystander -- sought to fetch Jesus back home since his activity was arousing the crowds and drawing attention. Matthew (12:46-50) and Luke (8:19f) present this text in such a way as to lessen the awkwardness for Christian readers. Luke gives another scene from the public life of Jesus. He relates that when a woman praised his mother, he responded by saying, "Yes, blessed indeed are they who hear the word of God and follow it" (Luke 11:28). This translation is more correct than "Blessed rather..."

Interest in the beginning of the life of the Messiah led to the composition of the infancy narratives in Matthew 1 and 2 and Luke 1 and 2. They diverge from each other in many ways, especially the genealogies, so that the stories cannot be fully harmonized. The two evangelists were obviously drawing on different streams of tradition. Further, each evangelist had a theological purpose, which meant that the traditions were placed in a theological perspective. Both infancy narratives have Old Testament and Jewish traits, but the historical core remains.

We learn that Mary came from Nazareth and that she was espoused or engaged to Joseph, of the house of David (Matthew 1:18; Luke 1:26f). Whether Mary herself was of the house of David is not clear from the text. Joseph's ancestry was enough to make Jesus legally son of David. Before Mary had been brought to Joseph's house as his married wife, the angel Gabriel announced to her (Luke 1:26ff) that she was most highly favored and that the Lord was with her. She was to conceive and bring forth a son whom she was to call Jesus. Her motherhood was not to come about through human intervention but through the action of the holy Spirit (Matthew 1:18; Luke 1:35). The heavenly message telling her that she was to be the mother of the Messiah prompted her to pay a visit to her cousin Elizabeth. The evangelist attributes to Elizabeth, to

Mary herself, and to Simeon, as he greets the Messiah in the temple, hymns of praise and thanks that are mosaics of the Old Testament elements.

The birth takes place in Bethlehem (Matthew 1:23; 2:1; Luke 1:27; 2:4). Shepherds come to pay homage to the child, and wise men from the East. Herod's murderous intentions force Mary to take refuge in Egypt. When the family returns, Mary lives at Nazareth with Jesus and Joseph (Matthew 2:23; Luke 2:38). Jesus was circumcised and presented in the temple according to the prescriptions of the law (Luke 2:21-40). Only one other scene from the childhood of Jesus is narrated, the visit to the temple in Jerusalem (Luke 2:41-52). It is a striking scene because, instead of joining the returning pilgrims and without warning his parents, Jesus stayed behind. When his parents found him after an anxious search, he gave them the astonishing answer, "How is it that you sought me? Did you not know that I must be about my Father's business?" As the evangelist says, Mary and Joseph did not understand, but Mary kept all these things in her heart, to meditate on them in faith.

One particular question forces itself upon our attention in the story of the infancy. It is that of the virginal conception and birth. Why should Mary have let herself be espoused if she had no intention of leading a married life? Hence, many theologians now assume that Mary resolved on a life of virginity only at the moment of the annunciation. She then dedicated herself exclusively and without reserve to the service of the divine plan of salvation. Through this dedication, she conceived the Son of God in her spirit as well as in her body.

The holy Spirit is here represented not as the father who begets Jesus but as an active force which brings about the conception. The notion of procreation without a father is foreign to the Old Testament. It also differs essentially from pagan mythology, according to which a god unites himself to an earthly woman and begets a child like an earthly father. Hence, the virginal conception and birth of Jesus must be considered as a revelation proper to the New Testament.

Nonetheless, this revelation was prepared for in the Old Testament narratives in which great men were born of mothers who were humanly speaking doomed to sterility (Genesis 18: 1 Samuel 1). The promise of the Messiah in Isaiah 7:14, which speaks of the bringer of salvation and his birth from a woman, was probably already understood by the Greek translators of the Septuagint as a prophecy of the virginal birth. This, at any rate, is the meaning given to the text of Isaiah in Matthew.

If one asks why Jesus should have been virginally conceived, the answer is not that an earthly father would have been a sort of unwelcome rival to the heavenly Father of the preexistent Word. Nor is it that conception in the course of marriage would have been unworthy of the eternal Son of God. The reason is the transparency with which the virginal conception and birth lets the creative power of God and his sole initiative in the work of salvation shine through. No human deed occasions it.

It is part of the most ancient faith of the Church that after the birth of Jesus, her first-begotten (Luke 1:7; cf. Matthew 1:25), Mary renounced married intercourse with Joseph in consequence of her total dedication to the charge given her by God and hence to God himself. The "brothers

of Jesus" who are mentioned several times in Scripture (Mark 3:31; 6:3; John 2:12; Acts 1:14; 1 Corinthians 9:5; Galatians 1:19) could be the actual brothers of Jesus as far as the literal sense of the texts is concerned but, according to biblical Greek, they need only have been cousins of Jesus (Genesis 13:8; 14:14). Catholic exegetes take the latter meaning. Then, according to Mark 6:3; 15:40, Mary, the mother of the brothers of Jesus, is different from the mother of Jesus himself.

The Acts and the Gospel of John provide further information. According to Acts, Mary was with the disciples of Jesus at Jerusalem as they awaited the coming of the holy Spirit promised by Jesus (Acts 1:14). According to John, Mary took part in the marriage feast of Cana (John 2:1-11). She asks Jesus to come to the aid of the hosts whose wine has run out. Jesus first refused his mother's request and then grants it. Mary appears here as the lady of the house. It is obvious that, at the time when the fourth gospel was composed, Mary's place was fully recognized in the Church (Bultmann).

Under the cross (John 19:25ff), her dying Son tells Mary that she is now to consider the beloved disciple as her son. Jesus tells the disciple that he must consider Mary as his mother. The transparently symbolic character of the fourth gospel allows us to conclude that the words of Jesus go beyond the purely historical and point to the relationship between Mary and the Church.

The doctrine of the Church emerges as follows: Mary conceived Jesus the Messiah through the holy Spirit and is therefore truly bringer-forth and mother of God. In and after the birth of Jesus, she remained a virgin. It may be affirmed that Mary's giving birth was a fully human and personal act and that even as a bodily process it was entirely determined by the grace of her motherhood, though it is impossible to indicate precisely the nature of the virginity of the birth. It may be said that Mary conceived Jesus of the holy Spirit without a male principle of generation. It is the constant teaching of the Church from the beginning that she gave birth to Jesus without violation of her integrity and that she remained ever virgin. Though there has been no formal definition on the subject, the perpetual virginity of Mary is part of the faith and preaching of the Church.

Mary entered into the process of salvation through her faith. As the Fathers frequently affirmed, she first conceived the Son of God and savior in her heart through faith and then in her body. By her "Let it be done" to the divine message, Mary contributed to salvation, just as Eve had to man's ruin. This does not mean that God made his plan of salvation dependent on Mary's consent but that, according to the eternal plan of salvation, man for his part was to assent to salvation through divine grace. Humanity's YES to God and to Christ the savior is summed up in Mary. In her acceptance of God's plan for her by faith, she received salvation for all. Mary's participation is founded on the fact that she gave life to the historical bringer of salvation and followed his work in faith and love to the death of the cross. But this was not all. The salvation brought by Christ is ordained to each person by its very constitution. It calls for acceptance and assimilation. This is where its essential purpose is fulfilled.

Mary was the primary recipient of his salvation, which she took to herself in the most excellent way, not only for herself in individualistic isolation but also with a willingness and an openness that were oriented to all people. Her personal appropriation of salvation has significance for the

whole Church. Salvation is present and accessible in the Church, the body of Christ, and Mary is the first and most privileged member of the Church. The Church is the body of which Christ is the head, and the Church is the bride of whom Christ is the bridegroom. The first image is not meant to point to a natural but to a personal relationship, and the second is even more explicitly personal. They both mean that the Church, the fellowship of the faithful, is called to bring about and maintain the saving bond with the savior, and that this is its responsibility.

Mary was the type or model of all in pronouncing her "Let it be done", both of those who already belong to the Church and of all others insofar as all are called to the Church, that is, to Christ. But it would be wrong to see Mary's role in such a way that the immediate relationship to Christ and in him to God would be obscured. The function of Mary means that dedication to Christ has a Marian coloring but not that it loses any of its directness. Mary is where the salvation of Christ came to people in the world, not just as an objective entity but also as the movement of Christ toward people. That this is involved in the relationship of Mary to Christ is particularly clear from the fact that she was with the disciples in Jerusalem awaiting the descent of the holy Spirit (Acts 1:14). She was not invited to the Last Supper, but her presence is noted with some emphasis as the holy Spirit was awaited. She knew the power of the Spirit from her own experience since the annunciation. In the Spirit, Jesus himself remained present in the fellowship of the Church. That Mary was there when the Church was constituted in the holy Spirit, in the Spirit of Christ, is significant for the whole course of its history.

Now in his presence in heaven, her loving gaze is fixed forever on her risen Son and on his brothers and sisters. But her whole glorified existence is also praise, thanks, and intercession before God. What she is, she is through Christ. What she does, she does through Christ. People do not receive salvation as individuals or monads in isolation from one another but as social beings. Each one who receives this gift of salvation becomes also a source of salvation. The good of one is fertile in good things for the other. This general principle holds true for Mary in a special and comprehensive way. Mary's heavenly life of dedication to Christ is marked by her care for the brothers and sisters of her Son who are still on their pilgrim way to the Father. Her existence is perfect exchange of love and also hopeful concern.

The function of Mary in salvation determines her relation to the Church. At a very early date, Mary was regarded as a type or model of the Church, and the Church as the image of Mary. Mary is type or model in her motherly fruitfulness and virginal integrity. In the tradition of the Church, especially in Augustine, Mary's motherhood of Jesus expands to the spiritual motherhood of all the faithful. Her virginity is displayed in her total dedication to God. The Church, in turn, mediates the salvation of Christ through its preaching and the sacrament of baptism. It, thus, brings forth the Son of God by grace in people. The Church is virginal because it remains true in faith, that is, in the loving acceptance of God mediated by Christ. Hence, the Church has a Marian life inasmuch as it contemplates, grasps, and proclaims the salvation of Christ realized in Mary.

--Michael Schmaus, edited by Patrick J. Hession