

The Coming Home JOURNAL



Mary, Mother of God

Our Journey Home

By Larry and Joetta Lewis

My father is a retired Assemblies of God pastor. My parents had a deep and abiding love for Jesus Christ. Their lives expressed who Christ was.



I vividly remember being awakened in the middle of the night by the sound of their praying—praying for each of the people in their church. Although my parents never spoke in derogatory terms about anyone, including Catholics, many of the ministers I met were not so generous. I heard more than one preacher expound on the evils of Catholicism. For many, it was taken for granted that the Catholic Church was the Great Whore of Babylon and the pope the Antichrist.

I was in my thirties and an ordained United Methodist minister before I met my first nun, Sister Monica Marie. Joetta had taught with her at

Ursuline Academy in Dallas, Texas. It was through Sister Monica Marie that Joetta experienced a dynamic encounter with the Holy Spirit. To my surprise, I discovered that this Sister was truly a woman of God. My heart was warmed just by being in her presence. She was totally the opposite of all I had envisioned nuns to be.

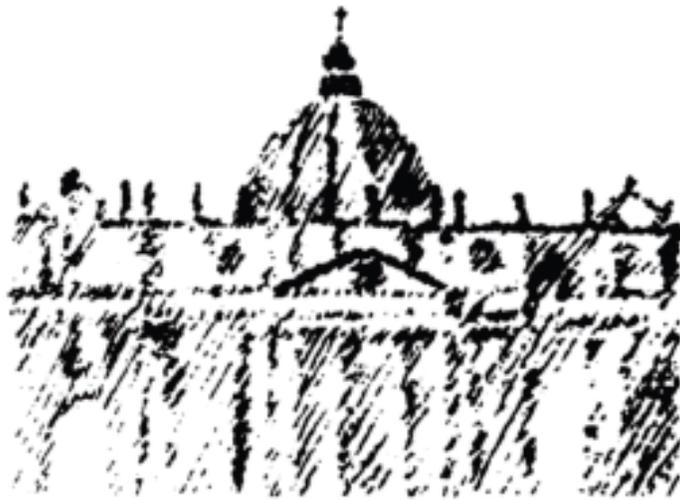
My first contact with a priest was in 1996. While working on my doctorate at Oral Roberts University, I met Father Amalor Vima from India. As classmates, we spent a good deal of time together and became close friends. It was in this environment that something happened that would revolutionize

my life forever. During a reflective moment in one of our sessions, Selmar Quayao, a Methodist bishop from Brazil, stood and said: “In my country, as a Protestant, I am in the minority. Unfortunately, there is much animosity between our church and the Catholic Church. Many of my people are filled with bitterness toward all Catholics. Yet here, Father Vima is in the minority, and I’ve seen nothing from his life

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Welcome to this edition of the *Coming Home Journal.*

The goals of the Coming Home Network International and this Journal are not to proselytize, but rather to explain in clear terms the truth about and the truths of the Catholic Church. Almost all of our authors are converts to the Catholic Church, many from strong anti-Catholic backgrounds. Many of us were Protestant clergy and academics who had to give up a lot to become Catholics.

I'm constantly amazed at the false stories I was taught about the Catholic Church and Her teachings, and am ashamed at how freely I then taught these untruths without examining my sources. I am also well aware of some vitriolic anti-Catholic publications written by ex-Catholics who now seem fully determined to save every Catholic from the "whore of Babylon." At this point I will make only two quick comments: First, having been a Catholic doesn't necessarily mean one understands fully or clearly what the Catholic Church teaches. I grew up with and pastored hundreds of Protestants who had only a minimal understanding of Lutheranism or Presbyterianism. I've also known dozens of Protestants as well as Catholics who "found Jesus" in other denominations than those in which they had been raised (including myself) who then claimed that their previous denominations had not proclaimed Jesus.

Secondly, anyone with an open mind who heard Pope John Paul II's clear and sincere proclamation of the Gospel during his trip to Cuba knows that he is certainly not the Anti-Christ (he is a very humble and dedicated servant of Jesus Christ), nor is the Catholic Church the "whore of Babylon".

We in the Coming Home Network International, though mostly converts, are anything but anti-Protestants. We are very thankful for the faithful witness of our Protestant families, friends, congregations and pastors who led us to Jesus Christ and

nurtured us in the Christian faith. It is now our desire to help them discover the fullness and power of the Faith, as taught by the Early Church Fathers and throughout history in Sacred Tradition.

We understand that there are many who, for a variety of reasons, have been hurt and discouraged by the Catholic Church and have left to join other denominations, just as there have been many brought up in Protestant churches who, for similar reasons, left to join other churches. We the members of the Coming Home Network International deeply believe that the Catholic Church is the true church founded by Jesus Christ. It is not the perfect church, because it is made up of sinners (like me). We believe however, as the Catholic Church teaches, that the fullness of the Christian faith subsists in this Church founded by Jesus Christ in his hand-chosen Apostles.

For this first issue of the Coming Home Journal, we chose to focus our theme on what for many is the most difficult hurdle to cross when considering the Catholic Church—Mary, the Mother of God. We pray that the following stories and articles will answer any questions a non-Catholic might have about our Blessed Mother.

In putting this journal together, we experienced a number of blessings that we accept as affirming gifts from God. For example, as we were approaching deadlines, we had yet to receive any Journey Home stories from CHNetwork members whose conversions had involved some strong Marian focus. But then within two days, we not only received Joan Tussing's conversion story in the mail, but my wife Marilyn and I had the privilege of meeting with the Lewis', who quickly emailed us their conversion testimony.

In both of these conversion stories, the messages of Marian apparitions played an important role in awakening their hearts to



Mary and the Catholic Church. Because a large number of contemporary apparition sites are not approved by the Church, we need to make it clear that with these articles we are not necessarily promoting any unapproved apparitions, but are completely submissive to the wisdom and discernment of the Church. Since many of you may not have the foggiest idea what we're talking about, we've included an article on the Catholic Church's position on Marian apparitions.

Since devotion to Mary is probably one of the most uncomfortable aspects of Marian doctrine for non-Catholics, we've included three articles addressing this important part of Catholic devotional life.

Again, I pray that these articles and stories are an encouragement to you. If you have any questions or comments, please either contact us or the person who gave you this free journal. We want to do whatever we can to help those outside the Catholic Church, those who have left the Church, or those who are life-long Catholics but have lost the "joy of their salvation" (Psalm 51), discover the great joys and truths of the Catholic Faith.

May the Father richly bless you as you seek to follow Jesus His Son, our loving Lord and Savior.

Lewis, continued from page 1...

but the love of Jesus Christ.” With tears running down his face, he said, “Father Vima, I want you to forgive me.”

I watched as these two men of God embraced. There was not a dry eye in the room. In that one brief moment, my mind began to envision a new possibility—Protestants and Catholics all over the world coming together, embracing in love, and dropping to their knees in prayer.

In this simple act, Selmar Quayo had challenged all of us to become ministers of Reconciliation. My thoughts raced. “Imagine what the Holy Spirit could do if Catholics and Protestants really were one.” The words of Jesus flashed through my mind: “If you are offering your gift at the altar and remember that your brother has something against you, leave your gift there in front of the altar. First go and be reconciled to your brother; then come and offer your gift” (Matthew 5:23-24). As I watched the scene unfold, I could almost hear Jesus praying, “May all of them be one, Father . . . that the world may believe that You have sent Me” (John 17:21). I knew at that moment that I must become a minister of Reconciliation.

Years earlier, Joetta and I had ministered at a Southern Baptist church in Tulsa, Oklahoma. After the service, a woman came up to Joetta and asked her if she would pray for her daughter, Regan. She did not want, however, to divulge the specific prayer need. Joetta assured her that it wasn’t necessary to know the need because the Holy Spirit would intercede for Regan. For the next year, Joetta prayed faithfully for a young lady she had never met.

At that time, Joetta was working as a technical writer for Thrifty Rent-a-Car. One day, her boss informed her that they had hired a new software trainer and were going to put her in the cubicle across from Joetta’s. They asked Joetta to make her feel welcome and to show her around. When the new trainer arrived, she introduced herself as Regan. To Joetta’s surprise, here stood the young lady she had been praying for all those months! God was definitely up to something. Joetta and Regan worked as associates over the next seven years. Although they never socialized outside of the workplace, they began to develop a close relationship.

One day in 1995, Regan shared that she and her husband were having problems in their marriage. Kelvin was a

Roman Catholic, and she was a Southern Baptist. For several years, Regan attended the Catholic Church off and on with Kelvin, and although he did not feel comfortable in the Baptist Church, he would attend with Regan on special occasions. This arrangement worked until they had children and realized how strongly they both felt about how their children should be raised. To Regan’s chagrin, Kelvin was adamant about baptizing and raising their children in the Catholic Church. They were at an impasse when Regan came to Joetta for advice.

Joetta told Regan that a house divided cannot stand and that it was essential that they be in church together. Joetta suggested that if her husband would not go to church with her, she should go to church with him. God would bless their marriage if Regan would submit to the spiritual authority of her husband. Joetta informed Regan of some classes held by the Catholic Church that she could attend, without obligation, to learn about the Catholic faith. Joetta said, “If I were you, I would want to know what my children were going to be taught so that I could counter any incorrect teaching.” For Regan’s peace of mind, Joetta said, “You go through the program, bring all of the material to me, and I’ll give it to Larry so that he can check it out and see if it is scripturally sound.”

I never paid any attention to the material Regan gave Joetta, except for two things. One was a newspaper article by a Lutheran journalist discussing Marian apparitions. The author of the article had spoken at Regan’s church and told how the Mother of God had been appearing to six young children daily since 1981. Regan was so intrigued that she read everything she could get her hands on. The second thing she gave us was a cassette by a woman who had been miraculously healed at the same apparition site. This experience had so affected this woman, a nominal Christian at best, that she committed her life to serving Christ. I took these items and started to throw them away. On a whim, I stuck them in a drawer instead.

The week before May 25, 1996, Regan told Joetta that she was going to a Marian conference in Wichita, Kansas. She was excited about it because both the author of the article and the woman who had been healed were featured speakers.



Regan, however, was bothered by a prayer she had received in the pre-conference material that supposedly would be prayed at the conference. “I would like,” she told Joetta, “for you and Larry to look it over and see what you think.”

As Joetta read the prayer, all kinds of red flags went up. In almost a state of panic, she brought the prayer to me. It was the Consecration to the Immaculate Heart of Mary. As I read the prayer, the hair on the back of my neck stood straight up. “Immaculate Heart of Mary, I give to you my body and soul . . .” I stopped in mid-sentence. Rage filled my heart. “This prayer is demonic!” I said, “You don’t give your soul to anyone but Jesus. Tell Regan she can go to the conference, but whatever she does, she must not pray that prayer.” Within three days, something deep within my spirit told me I had made a terrible mistake. Remorse for what I had said flooded my soul.

I decided to take a copy of the prayer to Father Vima. “I don’t understand this prayer,” I said. “How in the world can you give yourself to Mary in this way?” With a twinkle in his eye, Father Vima gently said, “Larry, have you ever held Joetta in your arms and said, ‘I love you, I adore you, I worship the ground you walk on?’” “Yes,” I cautiously replied.

“Have you looked lovingly into her eyes and assured her of your complete love and devotion? Have you spoken words like, ‘I am completely yours now and forever?’ ‘All that I am and all that I ever hope to be is yours?’”

I was beginning to get his point. “If the truth were known,” I admitted, “I’ve used those exact words.”

“Catholics,” he continued, “would never say of Mary, ‘We adore you.’ We venerate her. We honor her. However, we would never say ‘we adore you’ because adoration is reserved only for God. It is something we give only to Jesus. We adore Him. He is the King of Kings and Lord of Lords, and there is no one like Him. We believe that Mary, as the Mother of God, loves and cares for us. What we’re saying in this prayer is, ‘All of me I place in your hands, and I ask you to take me to your son, Jesus.’ Mary always points to Jesus.”

As I listened to Father Vima, I began to realize how wrong I had been. Two emotions flooded over me simultaneously—shame and joy: shame for my quick assessment and joy at the possibilities that were opening up.

I went home and found the Marian newspaper I had put in one of my dresser drawers and began to read. As I read what Mary was reported as saying, I was struck by how biblically based her messages were—pray, repent, fast, commit your life to Christ. This was obviously not the work of Satan. I wondered aloud, “Could this really be the Mother of God?” If it were, then what she said was important and worthy of our consideration. One of her more frequent statements was somewhat puzzling: “Pray the rosary every day.” Joetta and I knew nothing about the rosary. Perhaps it was time to discover what this prayer was all about.

As Regan was leaving for the Marian conference, Joetta gave her some money to buy a rosary. Their relationship had become strained and sometimes emotionally charged because of Mary, and Joetta felt that if she let

Regan show her how to pray the rosary, it would at least keep them dialoguing. When Regan gave Joetta her rosary, she said, “What’s great is that the man who made this rosary lives just outside Tulsa, in Claremore, Oklahoma. If there’s ever a problem with the rosary, it is guaranteed.”

The more closely that Joetta looked at her rosary, the less she liked the centerpiece. “It looks like an idol. I think I’ll call Two Hearts Rosaries and see if they’ll exchange it for something else.”

“Come on out,” the voice on the other end of the line said, “Bob’s work is guaranteed, and he will be happy to replace it with something you like.” When we arrived, Bob’s wife, Johanna, asked Joetta what was wrong with the rosary. “It’s the centerpiece,” Joetta said, “I don’t like the centerpiece.” Johanna looked at her quizzically, “What about it don’t you like?” “Well, it looks too, you know, Catholic!”

“The rosary,” Johanna said, smiling, “is Catholic!”

While Joetta looked at centerpieces, Bob was sharing with me what had happened to them on a pilgrimage to an apparition site in Europe. I yelled at Joetta, “Come in here and listen to this. You won’t believe this story!” These were the first real Catholics that we had ever spent any time with, other than Sister Monica Marie and Father Vima.

Bob shared with us how God, through Mary, had transformed their lives. As he told their story, tears rolled down his face. He said he hadn’t stopped crying since they returned from their pilgrimage. In his words, his heart “just turned to mush.” When they got back, Bob went in and quit his job at Amoco. He was a laboratory technician and had been with the company for over twenty-one years. Not too long after that, Johanna quit her job at Tulsa University. God was calling them to complete obedience and dependence upon Him.

During this time, Bob met a nun who showed him how to make rosaries. Bob decided to make two rosaries: one to thank Mary for leading him to Jesus and one to thank Jesus for saving his soul. The rest is history. All of Bob’s rosaries are lovingly hand-made. He sees each bead as a prayer sent out by Mary to convert and bring souls to Jesus. Joetta’s and my conversion are the direct result of those prayers.

After our meeting with Bob and Johanna, I was emotionally shaken. As we drove away, neither of us said a word. It was as if we had experienced an epiphany. I can’t explain it. I felt as if I had been in the presence of Jesus. Not wanting to go right home, I pulled into a fast-food restaurant to get something to drink. As we sat there looking at each other, tears began to stream down our faces. What was happening to us? What was God asking of us?

Our lives were literally being pushed toward the Catholic Church. Regan had introduced us to the owners of the local Catholic bookstore, so we decided to go there for more information. Lee and Anita lovingly welcomed us and pointed us to exactly what we needed. When we figured our income tax at the end of that year, we discovered that we had spent over \$5,000 on books, cassettes, videos, and other materials in search of spiritual truths! We couldn’t get enough. We were in Lee’s store three and four times a day. “We’re here for our Catholic fix.” Lee and Anita would just laugh and point us to another book, cassette, or video. It was like an addiction that we couldn’t get satisfied. One question just led to another and another. It was a wonderful experience.

We began going to bed later and waking up earlier, trying to jam as much reading into the day as possible. We decided to maximize our time. I began taking Joetta to work and picking her up so that we could read aloud coming and going. I would pick her up for lunch, put a couple of lawn chairs and TV trays in the trunk, and drive to a park so that we could read without interruptions. We took turns—one would eat while the other would read aloud. We did everything together. God was graciously speaking to us together, drawing us at the same pace deeper into Himself.

We read the Catechism of the Catholic Church from cover to cover. The Catechism is the greatest systematic theological work we have ever read. Answers to long-sought-after questions were coming like torrential showers.

I remember one Saturday morning in particular. We both woke up about four o’clock in the morning. We sat up in bed, each with a Bible in one hand and a Catechism in the other. I would say, “Joetta, listen to this. This is fantastic. This continued on page 26...





Our Lady's Gentle Call to Peace

By Joan Tussing

"Have you been caught in the traps of life's difficulties? You must not look at your own situation or the trap that holds you. Look at the Lord. Let God act and take care of you. Cast your burdens on the Lord who will nourish you. With your mind at peace; await whatever happens. Let the Divine Will be enough for you since it is always very good. As God directed St. Catherine of Siena, 'Think of me and I will think of you.'"

—Peace of Mind: Spiritual Counsel from St. Francis De Sales, audio cassette.¹

Last year, Francka Povsic, my special friend and co-leader of our prayer group gave me a copy of the above inspirational audio cassette. These words from St. Francis De Sales powerfully describe the Truth that I have learned about God's infinite love for me. Our Lady gently called me to peace through reported messages of Mary and eventually to the Roman Catholic Church.

Using a Catholic phrase, I grew up as a "cradle Lutheran." My parents raised me in a loving Lutheran home. In quiet humility, my parents have always modeled devotion to family, daily prayers, church involvement and service to others.

Up through my teenage years, I was much more spiritual than most of my peers. When I was confirmed in ninth grade, I wanted to become a missionary. I even chose to go to Capital University because it was a Lutheran college. But during college in the 1970s, I found myself pulled away into a secular college lifestyle. Friendships, parties and career became my attachments more so than God did.

Once married, my husband Doug and I became regularly attending members of the Lutheran church; however, I was attached to perfection, work and pleasing my family and everyone else. As our two children grew, we both became very active in our Lutheran parish. As I look back, I realize that church became another place for achievement at the expense of my own spiritual development and personal relationship with Jesus. I was so busy "doing" things for the church that there was no room for prayer and quiet time with God.

Five years ago at the age of 38, the years of attachment to the world had paid their toll. I was suffering from anxiety,

depression and early menopause. Although I was not addicted to alcohol, I used alcohol to mask my pain. As a high school guidance counselor, I felt constantly bombarded by the evil effects of the world on our youth: materialism, drugs, teen pregnancy, abortion, suicide and spiritual starvation. Given the overwhelming nature of these problems, I felt helpless to make a difference.

From the depths of my agony, I cried out to Jesus for help. Much to my surprise, Jesus sent me his Blessed Mother. This was particularly surprising because as a Lutheran, I was taught to consider Mary only at Christmas. But when we truly relinquish our worldly attachments and open ourselves to God's Will, He responds to us in ways far beyond our human expectations. He reached me through His Blessed Mother, and eventually gave me the gift of the Roman Catholic Church.

This all began when a close Catholic friend told me about her pilgrimage to Medjugorje.** It had helped her deal with her marriage to a severe alcoholic. While reading a great book about Marian Apparitions, my spiritual journey moved into high gear. I did not experience miracles in the dramatic sense; I had no visions, apparitions or obvious supernatural experiences. Instead I became profoundly aware of Jesus, Our Lady, the angels and saints who were my heavenly team helping me to search for peace and happiness. Focusing on Our Lady's simple messages of peace, prayer, conversion, faith, fasting and penance, I now felt my prayers could make a difference to help the world.

As I began to live these message of

**A town in eastern Europe where Mary has been reported to be appearing.

Mary, the right people and situations became available to me through Jesus and the intercession of the Blessed Mother. For example, I found a local Catholic book store that was a rich source of information about Mary and the Catholic Church. The owners, who have made many pilgrimages to apparition sites, certainly gave me more information and support than I could have ever dreamed!! They invited me to their prayer group and consequently, I became friends with many incredible people who were in love with Jesus, Our Lady and the Catholic Church. I continued to attend their prayer group, and learned about Theotokos, a Marian center in Toledo, attending many of its sponsored events.

Many converts speak of the Virgin Mary as the last hurdle to Catholicism. The opposite was true for me. Through these messages of Mary, I quickly grew to love the Blessed Mother and thirsted to find out more about her. After attending the Chicago Marian Conference in 1993, I immersed myself in books, tapes and conferences about the Blessed Mother. I began fasting once a week and praying the Rosary. I was drawn to share



my love for Our Lady and my calling to live her messages by beginning a Rosary prayer group in Bowling Green, Ohio.

Our group began with eight Lutheran women who clumsily learned to pray the Rosary together. Heaven must have been chuckling over our awkward but sincere attempts! I believe Our Lady sent Francka Povsic into my life to help us. Francka had led a life of deep devotion to the Rosary and Our Lady since she was a little girl in her native land of Slovenia. She provided humble and profound spiritual guidance that touched our hearts and helped us persevere. Now in its fourth year, our prayer group is still ecumenical with Lutheran, Methodists and Catholic women praying together with Our Lady.

At the Chicago Marian Conference in 1993, the speakers emphasized the importance of visiting Jesus in the adoration chapel. Visit Jesus—what were they talking about?! As a Lutheran, I knew that Jesus was always with us but these people talked about Jesus as if he was in the same room!

Once I learned the significance of Eucharistic adoration, I took the brave step of seeking out the adoration chapel at St. Aloysius Church in Bowling Green, Ohio. Through weekly visits with Jesus and simply resting in His presence, Jesus led me through the difficult steps of letting go of my need to control every situation and replaced them with His Divine Will and Guidance. In that quiet chapel, Jesus took me by the hand and led me to a profound healing of the mind and body, and a conversion of my heart. As I look back, I realize that it was in that adoration chapel that Jesus led me to the Catholic Church.

Only another convert can truly understand the terror I felt once I realized that Jesus was calling me into the Catholic Church! Mine was not the typical conversion of a wife following her husband who was already in the Church. Instead, I was embarking on a journey alone. My entire family including my husband, children and parents were strong Lutherans and planned to stay that way. They thought I had lost my senses with my constant talk about the Blessed Mother. When I finally got up the courage to tell them about my decision to become Catholic, I am sure that they felt betrayed and forsaken.

Although this was quite painful for all of us, the more I prayed about my deci-

sion, my sense of peace grew stronger that it was the right choice. I was blessed with a sign that confirmed my decision. I was rereading the book about Marian apparitions during the flight home from a visit with my friend who first introduced me to Mary. I read again about several of the author's requests for roses from Our Lady and St. Therese of Lisieux as confirmation of decisions he was trying to make. I humbly prayed to Jesus and Our Lady that I would greatly appreciate a sign confirming that I should join the Catholic Church. I set my book down to stretch my legs. When I came back, a man behind me who had noticed my book tapped me on the shoulder and asked me about my interest in Marian apparitions. After a brief conversation, he handed me a holy card of St. Therese of Lisieux surrounded by roses! That day, I cried tears of joy and thanksgiving to my Lord who was affirming my decision through a special gift of confirmation.

Why did I decide to join the Catholic Church? I can state the reason in three words: The Holy Eucharist. I had always treasured Holy Communion which is considered the True Presence of Christ in the Lutheran Church; however unlike Catholics, Lutherans do not focus their worship and church life around the Eucharist. I was drawn to the Catholic Mass that culminates in the celebration of the Eucharist. Adoration of the Blessed Sacrament, Transubstantiation, and an emphasis on the contemplation of our Lord's passion made sense to me. In addition, I realized that I had been missing out on the support of the Church's Saints throughout the ages. Most of all, I needed to belong to the Church that had introduced me to my heavenly Mother.

I joined the Roman Catholic Church on the Easter Vigil of 1995. My special friend, Francka Povsic served as my sponsor. Not surprisingly, I chose St. Therese of Lisieux as my patron saint. My husband Doug, my children, and family friends supported me by attending the Easter Vigil. Although my family found all of this very difficult to understand, they accepted my choice.

Since my confirmation day, I have never regretted my decision. Beyond my wildest dreams, the Lord has showered me with boundless graces, friendships, knowledge of the Truth, peace, consolation and spiritual growth. I am deeply grateful to the many pastors, priests, religious and

lay people who have provided spiritual direction before and since my entry into the Church. Retreat houses including the Abbey of Gethsemane have provided ongoing places of prayer and solitude. Making my Consecration to Our Lord and Our Lady, according to the teaching of St. Louis DeMonfort, drew me into very special friendships with other women in my parish.

This past March 1997, I received the special grace to go on a pilgrimage to Medjugorje, yet another example of God's quiet but concrete miracles in my life. I did not experience supernatural signs or wonders, but rather a pilgrimage of fulfillment. I came home with an incredible sense of gratitude to God for all that He had given me. I now realize that the fruits of Mary's messages are to be found in everyday life.

I struggle like most Catholics to find time to pray the Rosary and spend time with Jesus; however, I increasingly look to Jesus, Our Lady, the Holy Spirit, the angels and Saints for help and guidance. When I start getting too emotionally attached to this world, I consciously try to let go and give my cares to Jesus. I ask for discernment and seek His will instead.

I continue to attend both the Lutheran and Catholic services. My family and I attend the Lutheran Church together and I attend the Catholic Church alone. Doug has demonstrated incredible love for me in accepting my spiritual journey even though it must be frustrating and painful for him. I agonize about how to unify our family's spiritual life, and I constantly pray for the Holy Spirit's help and guidance.

In September 1997, my special friend, Francka passed on into Heaven. After suffering from leukemia for over six years, Francka is now in joyful union with Jesus and Our Lady. Just weeks before she died, Francka gave me a special message: "I know one thing—I trust in the Lord completely. We can adore and honor him in the best way possible. I am not doing too well physically, but it will be O.K., little by little." This statement captured her life of humble obedience to the Lord, and the qualities that drew me into the Catholic Church. This was Francka's way. Like St. Therese of Lisieux, Francka lovingly did the ordinary things of life in an extraordinary way. It is not surprising that Francka died on September 8, the Feast of the Birth of our Lady.

Particularly when her suffering was severe, Francka would imagine herself at the foot of the cross, gazing into the eyes of Jesus. Francka has been a beautiful model to all of us who had the honor of knowing her.

As I looked out over those assembled in the funeral home to pray the Rosary with Francka's family, I felt a special spiritual bond with my fellow prayer group members. I sensed that Francka, Jesus and Our Lady were smiling down from heaven on all present including our ecumenical prayer group, made up of

Lutheran, Methodist and Catholic women who have responded to our Lady's call to pray for peace, conversion and love for each other.

Thank you, Jesus for hearing my cries for help and sending me your Mother!



I Graden, John, OSFS, (produced by). *Peace of Mind: Spiritual Counsel from St. Francis De Sales*. Toledo, OH: Word Consultants, 1996. (1-800-782-2270). This is an outstanding audio cassette for those who want to learn how to find God's peaceful presence in the midst of daily life.



Who is Mary of Nazareth?

By Kenneth J. Howell, Ph. D.

What kind of woman was Mary of Nazareth? As is true of Jesus, we know nothing of Mary's physical appearance or demeanor. But the historical sources give us a rather detailed picture of Mary's character.

Several historical sources give us much biographical information about Mary and they may be fairly reliable documents, but in this article I want to ask what we can learn from the canonical Scriptures about Mary's life and character.

It's often heard that the Bible says very little about Mary, but a closer look at Scripture reveals something quite different. If we use even the most superficial of criteria (i.e., number of words and verses), the New Testament says more about Mary than it does on topics everyone considers essential. For example, the very important parallelism between Adam and Christ in Paul's epistles occupies only two passages with a total of thirteen verses (Rom 5:12-21, ten verses & I Cor. 15:21-23, three verses). Passages about Mary in the birth narrative of Luke's Gospel alone occupy eighty-two verses. And this isn't counting Matthew, Mark and John.

My personal experience as a non-Catholic Christian convinced me that I couldn't find much about Mary because I wasn't looking for it. Also, the Scriptures

sometimes teach deep and rich truths in a very short space. For example, the topic of justification by faith occupies a very small portion of the New Testament—it's only discussed directly in Romans, Galatians and James 2:14-26—but it has played an enormously important role in the history of the Christian faith. Thus, it is unwise to conclude that the amount of verses devoted to a topic in the Bible is directly linked to its importance. In any case, there's more in the Bible about Mary than is often supposed.

A Woman for Our Times

Mary of Nazareth seems on the surface to be an ordinary Jewish woman whose life was indistinguishable from many others. She cooked, sewed and cleaned. She prayed, conversed and served the needs of her family. Yet what we see in the biblical stories of Jesus' birth shows that Mary's life was extraordinary. Her extraordinariness did not lie in herself; it was a divine gift. By the free choice of God the Father, she was predestined to be the mother of the Redeemer. By His

mercy, the heavenly Father filled her soul with His grace and His presence. In divine providence, Mary became the Spouse of the Holy Spirit by receiving in her womb the Son of God. In the silence of her Son's infant life, she contemplated the astounding truths of heaven.

This contrast between the ordinary and the extraordinary is important. The significance of Mary's life was hidden from everyday view. Rarely could others around her see the remarkable power and meaning of her life, just as many could see nothing remarkable about the life of her Son. And Mary precedes us all in that same respect. Paul says our life is also hidden with Christ in God (Col 3:3,4). Our outward life may seem very ordinary, but the inner strength of our life is the same as Mary's. The source of that strength is the One whom Mary bore—the Savior of Bethlehem.

We share so much with Mary. Like her, we are called to be disciples of her Son. When she and Joseph found Jesus in the temple, they both learned more of what being disciples meant. It means

giving over to God the Father the things in our lives which are most precious to us. But discipleship is impossible without faith, and Mary's example of faith calls us to the same commitment. When she said YES to God (Lk 1:38), she called us to faith in Christ by her example. Faith also means walking with God in the dark times when we can't see where the road ahead is leading. Mary knew that experience by her hidden life. She won no awards and received no acclaim from the world in her day. Yet her hidden life was brimming with importance and power.

Though her life appeared insignificant, her greatest influence came through the suffering she would endure. Simeon's words in Luke 2:35 call us to the same life as Mary's—a life of blessing through suffering. And not just any suffering. Her suffering and ours must be united with and flow from the sufferings of Mary's Son, Mary's Lord and ours.

We must recognize that while we are like Mary in many ways, she is also unique. The Mother of Jesus became a unique channel of Christ's bodily presence in the world. Through her body the Son of God, indeed God Himself, took His shape and form. Her eyes, her face, her stature, her blood, her DNA. Whatever natural makeup His body had, it came from this blessed virgin. We can never give to Jesus what Mary gave to Him. She cooperated in God's plan of salvation in a unique way. We can never give the substance of our bodies to Jesus the way Mary did, but we can do what others around Mary did. We can welcome Jesus into our lives, our world, our businesses, our homes, our schools and our hearts. We can welcome both the Son of God into our lives, and His mother who is blessed above all women (Lk 1:42).

Imagine yourself to be Simeon and you see the salvation of Israel (Lk 2:30,31). Would it have been possible to hail the One who would redeem the world, and not also call His mother blessed among women? Don't we call them happy, even blessed, who receive great gifts from God? Isn't Mary then the most blessed person to have ever lived? She received in her own body the greatest gift that anyone has ever received.

Mary is an instrument of the presence of God. She is a tabernacle where the Son of God came to dwell in the midst of His people (cf. John 1:14). We can look at the experience and promise of God's

presence in the Old Testament among the people of Israel because it is there that we learn of God's yearning to live among His people.

When the people of Israel were in the desert and saw the pillar of cloud by day and of fire by night, they bowed down and worshiped the Lord who had come to visit them with His special, local presence (Ex 33: 9,10). The same experience happened at the birth of Jesus. Matthew tells us that the Magi "found the child with Mary his mother." Their response was like that of the ancient Israelites who encountered the presence of God directly. "They fell down and worshiped him" (Mt 2:11). The Magi didn't simply feel God's general presence around them. They came to a specific place where God had given His presence in a specific way. They worshiped an infant boy who was God's presence made specific and local. They did not worship Mary just as the Israelites did not worship the tabernacle itself. But the Magi did honor Mary with their gifts because they recognized that she was the instrument of bringing God's presence into the world.

Our goal as Christians is to find those places where God manifests His presence in our times, and to go there with the expectation of worshiping Him and of honoring those who are the instruments of His presence. God transforms and unifies His people by giving them His presence. And God's presence, once it fills the hearts of God's people, brings unity in their relationships with one another. I believe that if Christians recognized Mary as God's chosen instrument of unity for Christians, we would see a level of spiritual life and unity among Christians unprecedented in the last four hundred years of western Christianity.

Mary's Response and Ours

Mary's response to God's grace in her life helps us to understand that unity among Christians comes through faith and obedience. Mary is a sign, an indicator of how we must respond to God. What were Mary's responses? The most justly famous is her response to God's invitation through Gabriel, "Behold the handmaiden of the Lord. Be it done to me according to your word" (Lk 1:38). With this commitment she showed herself to be Jesus' mother in both the natural and supernatural orders. It was a response prompted by grace and

fulfilled by obedience. And obedience leads to praise. Mary praised her heavenly Father in the Magnificat (Lk 1:46-55) for the salvation that had dawned on the human race. Any parent knows the delight of having a child express thanks for favors done. Mary knew instinctively that the Father in heaven would be pleased with her song of thanksgiving. She wanted to give praise to Him because she wanted to delight His heart.

What moved Mary to obedience and praise? Wasn't it her contemplative spirit? She constantly "treasured up these words" turning them over in her mind and heart again and again (Lk 2:19, 51). Mary knew, as Paul would later write, that the life of her Son, the Christ, was a mystery (see Col 1:24-2:3 esp. 2:2). Indeed, Christ's life contained "the mystery that was hidden for ages and generations, but now has been revealed to the saints" (Col 1:26).

Mystery in the Bible is not a five dollar novel but a priceless revelation of the Father's glory (cf. Jn 1:14-18). Paul calls it a mystery because it is at once revealed and concealed. Concealed to the spiritually obtuse; revealed to those with open hearts.

Since Mary's life was inseparably bound to Jesus, her life becomes a mystery just like His. In fact, their lives are not two separate mysteries but one grand mystery—the mystery of salvation. Jesus' life is the saving mystery and Mary was drawn into it by grace. That's why Mary's life is a sign of salvation, because her life is drawn into the mystery of her Son's life. Salvation is to be drawn into the love and power of the Son of God. Christ humbled himself to share in our humanity that we might share His divinity. Mary is a har-binger of our future.

Our response to Mary is indicated by how others around her responded to her extraordinary life. Those responses strike me as compelling because I looked on Mary as little more than the virgin-mother for the first forty years of my life. Mary was simply a biblical fact. Even then I never plumbed the depths of her virginity or maternity. But the responses to Mary in the Bible compel us because they provide wisdom and guidance on how we should respond to God's extraordinary work in her life. They compel us because they are responses to God's grace. And what does our salvation depend on? On how we respond to God's grace and salvation!

No better clue to our response can be found than Elizabeth's, John the Baptist's mother. Her spirit-filled words to Mary (cf Lk 1:41) should penetrate every Christian's heart, "Blessed are you among women and blessed is the fruit of your womb" (Lk 1:42). We can scarcely imagine what it would be like for the mother of our Lord to come to our home as she carried God within her womb (Lk 1:43). We can and should be no less amazed than Elizabeth to have Mary in our lives.

Simeon provides a further indicator of the proper response to Mary. For Simeon, the baby in Mary's arms was "the light of revelation for the Gentiles and the glory of Israel." The old prophet knew that this child was destined for "the falling and rising of many in Israel and a sign to be contradicted" (Lk 2:34). But Simeon also knew that Mary's future life was so intimately bound to her Son's that he promised her, under the direct inspiration of the Spirit, that "a sword will also pierce your soul" (Lk 2:35). The future sufferings of Jesus would be so profuse that they would overflow into Mary's life. Her life

would become a mirror of His life. Today, we can look upon Mary as a reflection of Jesus her Son. Mary is our window into the one and only Son of God who alone can unify people torn apart by misunderstanding and prejudice.

But perhaps our most important response to Mary is guided by that of Joseph. It is almost impossible to imagine the puzzlement and pain he must have felt when he learned that his espoused was pregnant (Mt 1:20). Yet Matthew's account shows clearly how Joseph obediently played the role that divine providence had set for him. In the quiet background, Joseph took his place in the kingdom of God to perform God's will no less than Mary. And his love for Mary and Jesus flowed from a truly just and holy heart (Mt 1:19). His love for his wife Mary was a perfect picture of Christ's love for the Church (cf. Eph 5:29). It is the same love we are called to have for Jesus and Mary.



This article is from Ken's book Mary of Nazareth: Sign and Instrument of Christian Unity [Queenship Publishing]. Kenneth was a Presbyterian Pastor for fifteen years before he was received into the Catholic Church in 1995. His conversion story is printed in *Journeys Home*.

What is Devotion to Mary?

By Mark Miravalle, S.T.D.

Many Protestant Christians believe that Catholic devotion to Mary eclipses Jesus, or involves improper worship of a human creature. In this short article, Dr. Miravalle, whose wife Beth is a convert to the Catholic Church, explains a proper view of Catholic devotion to Mary.



We begin our inquiry into the person and role of Mary, Mother of Jesus, by addressing a most fundamental question: what is devotion to Mary?

To answer this question we must first make a basic distinction. Adoration, which is known as *latria* in classical theology, is the worship and homage that is rightly offered to God alone. It is the acknowledgement of excellence and perfection of an uncreated, divine person. It is the worship of the Creator that God alone deserves.

Veneration, known as *dulia* in classical theology, is the honor due to the excellence of a created person. This refers to the excellence exhibited by the created being who likewise deserves recognition and honor. We see a general example of veneration in events like the awarding of academic awards for excellence in school, or the awarding of the Olympic medals for excellence in sports. There is nothing contrary to the proper adoration of God when we offer the appropriate honor and recognition that created persons deserve

based on achievement in excellence.¹

Here a further clarification should be made regarding the use of the term "worship" in relation to the categories of adoration and veneration. Some schools of theology use the term "worship" to introduce both adoration and veneration. They would distinguish between "worship of adoration" and "worship of veneration." The word "worship" (in the same way the theological term "cult" is traditionally used) in these classical definitions was not at all synonymous with adoration, but

could be used to introduce either adoration or veneration. Hence Catholic writers will sometimes use the term “worship” not to indicate adoration, but only the worship of veneration given to Mary and the saints. Confusion over the use of the term “worship” has led to the misunderstanding by some that Catholics offer adoration to Mary in a type of “Mariolatry,” or Marian idolatry. But worship in the form of adoration of Mary has never been and will never be part of authentic Catholic doctrine and devotional life.

Under the category of veneration we see the honor and reverence that the saints rightly receive. Why? Because the saints manifested a true excellence in the pursuit and the attainment of Christian holiness, and in light of this excellence, Our Lord grants the saints in Heaven an ability to intercede for those on earth who are in the process of pursuing the same holiness. This is a basic principle of the mystical body of Christ and the communion of saints.

Thomas Aquinas points out a further truth regarding veneration of the saints. The devotion a person has to God’s saints does not end with the saints themselves, but rather reaches ultimately to God through the saints. This is an important element in properly understanding authentic Catholic devotion to the saints. To give honor to the saint who has excelled in loving union with God is also to honor the object of his loving union: God Himself.

For example, if you offered special hospitality to the children of your long-time friends, then ultimately you are offering a sign of love to your long-time friends themselves. This is analogous to the veneration of saints. When we honor those who spent their life pursuing intimate union with God, we are also ultimately honoring God who is the object of their love.

In short, we can say it is pleasing to God and, ultimately, it gives Him glory when we honor those who excelled in love of Him. This is true about honoring the Mother of Jesus because of her special role in union with the Lord.

Within the general category of veneration we can speak of a unique level of veneration, an exalted level of honor that would be appropriate for honoring a created person whose excellence rises above that of every other created person. It is in this special level of veneration, classically

called hyperdulia, that we find the proper devotion ascribed to the Virgin Mary.

Hyperdulia, or special veneration of Mary, remains completely different and inferior to adoration that is due to God alone. Devotion to Mary is never to rival in nature or in degree the adoration proper only to God. While veneration of the Blessed Virgin will always be inferior to the adoration given uniquely to God, it will always be superior and higher than devotion given to all other saints and angels.

This distinction between adoration and veneration, and the unique veneration due to Mary, is discussed clearly in the following quote from the Second Vatican Council document, *Lumen Gentium* (66):

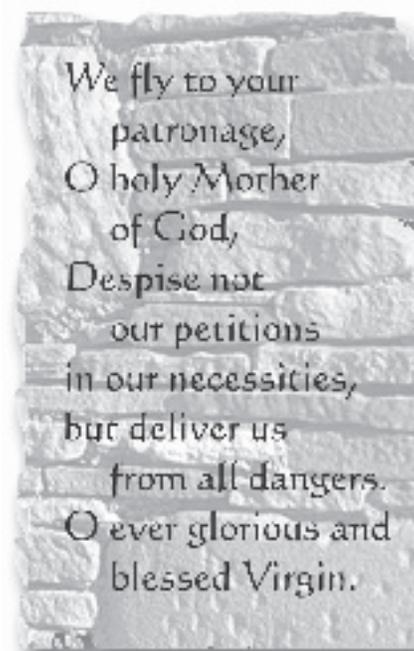
This [veneration of Mary], as it has always existed in the Church, for all its uniqueness, differs essentially from the [worship] of adoration, which is offered equally to the Incarnate Word and to the Father and to the Holy Spirit, and it is most favorable to it. The various forms of piety towards the Mother of God, which the Church has approved within the limits of sound and orthodox doctrine, according to the dispositions and understanding of the faithful, ensure that while the mother is honored, the Son—through whom all things have their being (cf. Col 1:15-16) and in whom it has pleased the Father that all fullness should dwell (cf. Col 1:19)—is rightly known, loved, and glorified, and his commandments are observed.



From *Introduction to Mary: The Heart of Marian Doctrine and Devotion*¹.

¹ For distinction of latria, dulia, and hyperdulia, cf. St. Thomas Aquinas, *Summa Theologica*, II-II, Q 84, a. 1; Q 304, a. 1-4.

The first historic indications of the existing veneration of Mary carried on from the Apostolic Church is present in the Roman catacombs. As early as the end of the first century to the first half of the second century, Mary is depicted in frescos in the Roman catacombs both with and without her divine Son....The most complete ancient prayer to the Blessed Mother preserved is dated approximately 250 A.D. Note the depth of understanding by the third century Church of Mary as having the power to intercede for spiritual protection (from “Introduction to Mary,” by Dr. Mark Miravalle):





Martin Luther's Devotion to Mary

Dave Armstrong

Despite the radicalism of early Protestantism toward many ancient Catholic “distinctives,” such as the Communion of the Saints, Penance, Purgatory, Infused Justification, the Papacy, the priesthood, sacramental marriage, etc., it may surprise many to discover that Martin Luther was rather conservative in some of his doctrinal views, such as on baptismal regeneration, the Eucharist, and particularly the Blessed Virgin Mary.

Luther indeed was quite devoted to Our Lady, and retained most of the traditional Marian doctrines which were held then and now by the Catholic Church. This is often not well-documented in Protestant biographies of Luther and histories of the 16th century, yet it is undeniably true. It seems to be a natural human tendency for latter-day followers to project back onto the founder of a movement their own prevailing viewpoints.

Since Lutheranism today does not possess a very robust Mariology, it is usually assumed that Luther himself had similar opinions. We shall see, upon consulting the primary sources (i.e., Luther's own writings), that the historical facts are very different. We shall consider, in turn, Luther's position on the various aspects of Marian doctrine.

Along with virtually all important Protestant Founders (e.g., Calvin, Zwingli, Cranmer), Luther accepted the traditional belief in the perpetual virginity of Mary (Jesus had no blood brothers), and her status as the Theotokos (Mother of God):

Christ...was the only Son of Mary, and the Virgin Mary bore no children besides Him... “brothers” really means “cousins” here, for Holy Writ and the Jews always call cousins brothers. (Sermons on John, chapters 1-4, 1537-39).

He, Christ, our Savior, was the real and natural fruit of Mary's virginal womb...This was without the cooperation of a man, and she remained a virgin after that. (Ibid.)

God says...“Mary's Son is My only Son.” Thus Mary is the Mother of God. (Ibid.).

God did not derive his divinity from Mary; but it does not follow that it is therefore wrong to say that God was born of Mary, that God is Mary's Son, and that Mary is God's mother...She is the true mother of God and bearer of God...Mary suckled God, rocked God to sleep, prepared broth and soup for God, etc. For God and man are one person, one Christ, one Son, one Jesus, not two Christs...just as your son is not two sons...even though he has two natures, body and soul, the body from you, the soul from God alone. (On the Councils and the Church, 1539).

Probably the most astonishing Marian belief of Luther is his acceptance of Mary's Immaculate Conception, which wasn't even definitively proclaimed as dogma by the Catholic Church until 1854. Concerning this question there is some dispute, over the technical aspects of medieval theories of conception and the soul, and whether or not Luther later changed his mind. Even some eminent Lutheran scholars, however, such as Arthur Carl Piepkorn (1907-73) of Concordia Seminary in St. Louis, maintain his unswerving acceptance of the doctrine. Luther's words follow:

It is a sweet and pious belief that the infusion of Mary's soul was effected without original sin; so that in the very infusion of her soul she was also purified from original sin and adorned with God's gifts, receiving a pure soul infused by God; thus from the first moment she began to live she was free from all sin” (Sermon: “On the Day of

the Conception of the Mother of God,” 1527).

She is full of grace, proclaimed to be entirely without sin—something exceedingly great. For God's grace fills her with everything good and makes her devoid of all evil. (Personal {“Little”} Prayer Book, 1522).

Later references to the Immaculate Conception appear in his House sermon for Christmas (1533) and Against the Papacy of Rome (1545). In later life (he died in 1546), Luther did not believe that this doctrine should be imposed on all believers, since he felt that the Bible didn't explicitly and formally teach it. Such a view is consistent with his notion of sola Scriptura and is similar to his opinion on the bodily Assumption of the Virgin, which he never denied—although he was highly critical of what he felt were excesses in the celebration of this Feast. In his sermon of August 15, 1522, the last time he preached on the Feast of the Assumption, he stated:

There can be no doubt that the Virgin Mary is in heaven. How it happened we do not know. And since the Holy Spirit has told us nothing about it, we can make of it no article of faith...It is enough to know that she lives in Christ.

Luther held to the idea and devotional practice of the veneration of Mary and expressed this on innumerable occasions with the most effusive language:

The veneration of Mary is inscribed in the very depths of the human

heart. (Sermon, September 1, 1522).

[She is the] highest woman and the noblest gem in Christianity after Christ...She is nobility, wisdom, and holiness personified. We can never honor her enough. Still honor and praise must be given to her in such a way as to injure neither Christ nor the Scriptures. (Sermon, Christmas, 1531).

No woman is like you. You are more than Eve or Sarah, blessed above all nobility, wisdom, and sanctity. (Sermon, Feast of the Visitation, 1537).

One should honor Mary as she herself wished and as she expressed it in the Magnificat. She praised God for his deeds. How then can we praise her? The true honor of Mary is the honor of God, the praise of God's grace...Mary is nothing for the sake of herself, but for the sake of Christ...Mary does not wish that we come to her, but through her to God. (Explanation of the Magnificat, 1521).

Luther goes even further, and gives the Blessed Virgin the exalted position of "Spiritual Mother" for Christians, much the same as in Catholic piety:

It is the consolation and the superabundant goodness of God, that man is able to exult in such a treasure. Mary is his true Mother, Christ is his brother, God is his father. (Sermon, Christmas, 1522)

Mary is the Mother of Jesus and the Mother of all of us even though it was Christ alone who reposed on her knees...If he is ours, we ought to be in his situation; there where he is, we ought also to be and all that he has ought to be ours, and his mother is also our mother. (Sermon, Christmas, 1529).

Luther did strongly condemn any devotional practices which implied that Mary was in any way equal to our Lord or that she took anything away from His sole sufficiency as our Savior. This is, and

always has been, the official teaching of the Catholic Church. Unfortunately, Luther often "threw out the baby with the bath water," when it came to criticizing erroneous emphases and opinions which were prevalent in his time—falsely equating them with Church doctrine. His attitude towards the use of the "Hail Mary" prayer (the first portion of the Rosary) is illustrative. In certain polemical utterances he appears to condemn its recitation altogether, but he is only forbidding a use of Marian devotions apart from heartfelt faith, as the following two citations make clear:

Whoever possesses a good (firm) faith, says the Hail Mary without danger! Whoever is weak in faith can utter no Hail Mary without danger to his salvation. (Sermon, March 11, 1523).

Our prayer should include the Mother of God...What the Hail Mary says is that all glory should be given to God, using these words: "Hail Mary, full of grace. The Lord is with thee; blessed art thou among women and blessed is the fruit of thy womb, Jesus Christ. Amen!" You see that these words are not concerned with prayer but purely with giving praise and honor...We can use the Hail Mary as a meditation in which we recite what grace God has given her. Second, we should add a wish that everyone may know and respect her...He who has no faith is advised to refrain from saying the Hail Mary. (Personal Prayer Book, 1522).

To summarize, it is apparent that Luther was extraordinarily devoted to the Blessed Virgin Mary, which is notable in light of his aversion to so many other "Papist" or "Romish" doctrines, as he was wont to describe them. His major departure occurs with regard to the intercession and invocation of the saints, which he denied, in accord with the earliest systematic Lutheran creed, the Augsburg Confession of 1530 (Article 21).

His views of Mary as Mother of God and as ever-Virgin were identical to those in Catholicism, and his opinions on the Immaculate Conception, Mary's "Spiritual

Motherhood" and the use of the "Hail Mary" were substantially the same. He didn't deny the Assumption (he certainly didn't hesitate to rail against doctrines he opposed!), and venerated Mary in a very touching fashion which, as far as it goes, is not at all contrary to Catholic piety.

Therefore, it can be stated without fear of contradiction that Luther's Mariology is very close to that of the Catholic Church today, far more than it is to the theology of modern-day Lutheranism. To the extent that this fact is dealt with at all by Protestants, it is usually explained as a "holdover" from the early Luther's late medieval Augustinian Catholic views ("everyone has their blind spots," etc.). But this will not do for those who are serious about consulting Luther in order to arrive at the true "Reformation heritage" and the roots of an authentic Protestantism. For if Luther's views here can be so easily rationalized away, how can the Protestant know whether he is trustworthy relative to his other innovative doctrines such as extrinsic justification by faith alone and sola Scriptura?

It appears, once again, that the truth about important historical figures is almost invariably more complex than the "legends" and overly-simplistic generalizations which men often at the remove of centuries—create and accept uncritically.



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Dave was received into the Catholic Church in 1991 from Evangelical Protestantism. His complete conversion story can be found in Surprised by Truth.



Hail Mary

By Lynn Nordhagen

*Hail Mary,
full of grace,
the Lord is
with thee.*

*Blessed art thou
among women,
and blessed is the
fruit of thy womb,
Jesus.*

*Holy Mary,
Mother of God,
Pray for us sinners,
now and at the hour
of our death.*

Amen.

The Hail Mary, traditionally known as the Ave Maria, is a Biblical prayer. In the first half, the words are directly from the Gospel of St. Luke, while the second half reflects what this could mean to us, praying Christians in the Body of Christ, pondering these things in our hearts.

The account of the angel Gabriel announcing to Mary that she is to be the mother of our Savior is familiar to all Christians. We find here the first elements of the Ave Maria. The angel's words are "Hail, O favored one," (Luke 1:28 RSV), or as Jerome translated it in his 4th century Latin edition, "full of grace."

What does it mean to be greeted as one "full of grace"? At the very least, Mary is highly favored by having been chosen to bear the Son of the Most High. The Latin translation using "full" points to the overflowing abundance and perfection involved. God Himself will dwell in her womb, the Creator will come into the world. The Holy Spirit will overshadow and dwell in her. It is all of grace. By this grace, Mary is special and blessed. The Church's reflections over the centuries have their root in these words of the angel Gabriel, sent from God. She teaches us to look to Mary for our model of what we ourselves hope to become by God's fullness of grace.

Mary, and we too, have the next words of the angel to assure us of His help in this. "The Lord is with you" (Luke 1:28). How many times in salvation history have servants of God heard these words? In Genesis 26:24, the Lord appears to Isaac, saying, "Fear not, for I am with you". The Lord God promises to be with Jacob (Gen. 31:3), with Moses (Exod. 3:12), with Joshua (Joshua 1:5), and with Gideon (Judges 6:16). Jesus Himself tells his accusers, "He who sent me is with me; he has not left me alone, for I always do what is pleasing to him"(John 8:29). The Lord will be with Paul in the city where He has many people (Acts 18:10). This is His promise to the Church in Matthew

28:20, "I am with you always." And in Revelation 21:3, a great voice tells us, "Behold, the dwelling of God is with men. He will dwell with them and they shall be his people and God himself will be with them." The Lord is with Mary, according to the angel, and we know He is with us. His assistance in the Old Testament has been brought to great fulfillment by His very presence with Mary in her womb. "The Lord is with you," has been a pregnant phrase throughout salvation history. And now in the Church, His real presence is with us in His Eucharist.

"Blessed art thou among women," says the prayer, in the words of Elizabeth (Luke 1:42). All the promises of blessing in the Old Testament are fulfilled with the coming of the Savior. Elizabeth, filled with the Holy Spirit, continues, "and blessed is the fruit of your womb". Mary is blessed because of her child, Son of the Most High. Elizabeth recognizes this, saying in astonishment, "And why is this granted me, that the mother of my Lord should come to me?" (Luke 1:43). Both Mary and Elizabeth are pregnant miraculously, by the grace of God, emphasizing to us that our life in God is all of grace, all by His willing and doing. We, too, are totally dependent on His grace, His mighty acts, his fulfilling of promises. In the Incarnation, Mary is blessed to have the God of the universe dwell in her womb. In the Church, we are graced to receive in the Eucharist His presence, His very body, the fruit of Mary's womb.

The scriptural first half of the prayer ends with the name of Jesus (Luke 1:31). We are told in Acts that "there is salvation in no one else, for there is no other name under heaven given among men by which we must be saved" (Acts 4:12). Mary rejoices in God her Savior, and all generations shall call her blessed. Like Mary, we are to rejoice in God's salvation through Jesus. Like Mary, we are blessed in the Son of the Most High. And like her, we are to be conformed to his image. "For those whom He foreknew, He

also predestined to be conformed to the image of His Son, in order that He might be the first-born among many brethren” (Rom. 8:29). Catholics believe that Mary’s sinlessness is due only and completely to the grace of her Savior, her Son. She did not earn this great privilege, but was prepared by His saving grace to shine as a promise of what we will be, when “we shall be like Him” (1John 3:2).

The second half of the prayer is a prayer of the Body of Christ, His Church. “Holy Mary,” we pray. When we call anyone or any thing holy, it is because of its relationship to God, who is “Holy, holy, holy” (Isaiah 6:3, Rev. 4:8). Vessels for the temple were considered holy because they were set aside for sacred use. We call the Bible the “Holy Bible,” because it is the word of God. People become holy when they become close to God. Mary listened to the angel’s message, and she answered humbly, “Let it be to me according to your word” (Luke 1:38). She carried Jesus in her womb and gave birth to Him, she nursed Him and lived side by side with Him. Her holiness comes from her relationship to God. She responded freely and with total faith, giving herself completely to God. “Behold, I am the handmaid of the Lord” (Luke 1:38). Her obedience of faith (cf. Rom. 16:25) made her holy. Her nearness to her Son made her holy. Our nearness and obedience to Her Son is to make us holy. “As obedient children, do not be conformed to the passions of your former ignorance, but as he who called you is holy, be holy yourselves in all your conduct, since it is written ‘You shall be holy because I am holy’” (1 Peter 1:14-16).

Mary can rightly be called holy, but what about addressing a prayer to her? As members of the communion of saints, we often ask fellow believers here on earth to pray for us. Catholic faith sees that those who have gone before us are nonetheless truly alive in Christ, “... who died for us, so that whether we wake or sleep, we might live with Him” (1 Th. 5:10). Therefore, it is appropriate to ask for their prayers, also. When we ask the Saints in heaven to pray for us, we are not offering them worship. “Praying to” the saints means asking them to pray for us, not worshipping them as divine.

So we pray, “Holy Mary, Mother of God.” Mary’s title, Mother of God, does not mean she existed before God and

brought Him into existence; it does not mean He is dependent upon her. The title grew out of the Church’s struggle against the Arian heresy in the fourth century. The Arians denied that Jesus was God. The Council of Ephesus in A.D. 431 declared that Mary was the “God-bearer” (Theotokos) as a way of teaching that Jesus was truly God. They intended to teach about Jesus, but they also taught about Mary. Jesus is truly God. If Mary is the mother of Jesus, and if Jesus is God, then she is the mother of God. He is one person, and she is His mother, and so she is the mother of God. In this way, Jesus is recognized as both Son of God and Son of Man. The Reformers also accepted this title of Mary, for example in the Lutheran Formula of Concord (1577).

“Pray for us sinners.” Here we come back to the issue of praying to saints. We, saints and sinners, are all in this Body of Christ together, whether we are living or “dead,” because we all are united in Christ by the same Holy Spirit. The Holy Spirit made us saints, and also perfected our brothers and sisters, the Saints in heaven. Although we seem to be separated by both space and time, in Him we are united as members of Christ. There is no big difference between asking a breathing saint beside us to pray for us, and asking St. Francis de Sales or Mary to pray for us. We are all in Christ. He is alive, and we are all alive in Him.

Protestants are not accustomed to addressing anyone but God in prayer. That’s why, at first, praying to saints seems idolatrous, even when a Catholic explains that we are really just asking—to pray means to ask—we are asking the saints to pray FOR us. Catholics know Mary is not God. She is not the Savior. She is not the one Mediator. Jesus is the only Mediator we need; we can always approach Him. He loves us tenderly. He also loves Mary tenderly. She is, like each of us, a member of His Church, embodying for all of us the prayerful posture, “Let it be to me according to your word” (Luke 1:38). She is a living example to us of receiving all the grace He desires to give us. She stands with us, in the Church, receiving grace upon grace. She also stands as our example of how powerful the grace of Christ is.

“Now and at the hour of our death. Amen.” This is God’s eternal now, in which our deaths, too, are present to

Him. In Catholic faith, the communion of saints includes all the members of the Body, past, present, and future (to us) who are being built together by Him into a holy temple (cf. Eph.2:22), our prayers for one another being an aspect of each part working properly (cf. Eph.4:16). The prayers of Mary and the saints are certainly to be counted among those of the righteous, which we always need (cf. James 5:16).

The first half of the Hail Mary, then, is directly from Scripture. The second half is simply putting into practice what Scripture teaches about our life in the Body of Christ, which is His Church. As we pray this beautiful prayer, may we behold the glory of the Lord in his presence with us and, like Mary, be “changed into his likeness, from one degree of glory to another; for this comes from the Lord who is the Spirit” (2Cor 3:18).



Lynn returned to the Catholic Church in 1997 after several years of intense involvement in Evangelical Protestantism. Her complete conversion story can be read in *Journeys Home*.

*Behold the handmaid
of the Lord. Be it done
unto me according to
thy word.*

—*Luke 1:38*

Mary and the Problem of Christian Unity

By *Kenneth J. Howell, Ph. D.*

We are living in a remarkable age. As we approach the third millennium of Christianity in the year 2,000, we are watching a world in extremes. Amid the rapid onslaught of secularization and irreligion, we find hordes of people seeking solace in religion.

Amid the ravages of war and violence, we find the comfort and love of those who care for the poor and disadvantaged. Amid the lightning pace of modern life, we find souls searching for deeper meaning by retreating to monasteries and ashrams for solitude.

Two of the most powerful inspirations in late twentieth century Christianity are the drive toward greater unity among Christians of widely differing backgrounds (ecumenism) and the rapid growth of Marian devotion all around the world. This century has seen unprecedented efforts to bring together Christians who have been separated by misunderstanding and prejudice. And just when the ecumenical movement on a formal level seemed moribund, a new surge of grassroots ecumenism is finding ways of bringing together Catholic, Orthodox and Protestant Christians. Whatever the outcome of these efforts, the air of this last decade of the second millennium is filled with the scent of Christian unity. It seems that Christians are grasping every opportunity to reconcile their doctrinal differences and to find the sweet savor of "brothers dwelling together in unity" (Ps 133: 1).

If this is an age of ecumenism, it is equally a Marian era because no century since the birth of Christ has witnessed such an outpouring of devotion to the mother of Jesus. As many observers note, reported apparitions and locutions have multiplied, leading numerous Christians to an unprecedented devotion to the humble handmaiden of the Lord who was privileged to bring the world its Redeemer. In tandem with these grassroots movements, there is a monumental effort within the

Catholic Church for the Pope to define as dogma Marian doctrines that have long been present in the Church (Mediatrice, Coredemptrix, Advocate). Whether or not the Supreme Pontiff of the Catholic Church decides to act, there is unlikely to be any diminishing of devotion to the mother of Jesus.

On the other hand, many non-Catholic Christians are mystified by such devotion to Mary. Some feel strangely drawn to honor her, but are afraid of falling into excessive focus on Mary to the exclusion of Jesus. To others, Marian devotion borders on the blasphemous. To still others, Catholics are idolaters. It is not an overstatement to say that no expression of historic Christianity has ever placed Mary in such a high position of honor as has the western Catholic tradition. And even though the Eastern Orthodox Churches have long honored Mary as the Mother of God, they do not have fully developed mariologies as the Western Church has.

The juxtaposition of ecumenical and Marian movements seems odd at best. On the surface, it appears that Mary would be the last subject chosen in an ecumenical dialogue. One might think that all the areas on which common agreement might be achieved should be addressed first, and then deal with the thorny question of Marian doctrine. Better to leave Mary until last. However, I am now convinced that questions about Mary must be addressed up front if any true ecumenism is ever to be achieved.

On a purely human level, no genuine friendship can ignore beliefs which are central to one party while those same be-



liefs are at best questionable to the other. Further, it is not completely honest for Catholics to pretend that Marian doctrines and devotions are not important and central to our lives. We ought to state openly that the Catholic faith does not allow the Church to ever change its defined dogmas about Mary. On the other hand, we must admit that not everything that goes on under the term Marian devotion is necessary or beneficial for the Church.

What can talk about Mary do to promote the cause of ecumenism? The answer depends on what we mean by ecumenism. One definition, and the one most common, sees ecumenism as a process of negotiation between different churches whereby one church gives up some aspect of its faith and the other partner relinquishes its claim to some of its distinctives. This process proceeds through a number of steps until a lowest common denominator is reached. The result is a church or some other official body which has a reduced form of faith and practice so that it might accommodate each respective member. This has largely been the pattern of ecumenism in the United States and the Western world for the better part of this century. In my judgment, such attempts have been a monumental failure. Mary cannot help with this type of ecumenism.

The other definition of ecumenism is not founded on the concept of negotiation, but on seeking together the truth of God's revelation. It begins with confessing that we don't apprehend God's truth completely, and that we must always seek to have the mind of Christ. In this conception, unity of heart and mind does not come from negotiated agreements, but from all parties, recognizing and embracing the objective truth of God.

It is a commonplace that married couples do not achieve success by each giving fifty percent to their marriage, but by each giving one hundred percent of themselves. In the same way, Christian unity comes from full commitment to searching for truth in a spirit of humility. Ecumenism begins with recognizing that unity already exists in God, that Christ is the center of unity, and that the Holy Spirit is the operative agent in bringing Christians together. Mary has everything to do with this kind of ecumenism.

Mary: The Sign of Unity ?

How can Mary help in promoting Christian unity? Many may feel the weight of disunity among Christians and long for a greater oneness in Christ, but can Mary really give us that greater oneness? Mary has been a source of division between Catholics and Protestants for a long time. What good will focusing on Mary bring? How can Christians be one when the very Marian devotions so precious to Catholics are viewed as idolatrous by Protestants? To human eyes, it seems that almost any other Christian doctrine would be better suited to bring unity than doctrines of Mary. And if we think of Mary just as a set of doctrines, that would be true. But Mary is more than a set of doctrines. Mary is a person. She lived her life on this earth as the mother of our Lord with her own character, mind, and idiosyncracies. These things are true regardless of what we believe about her. Mary is what she is apart from our beliefs.

There is one unmistakable fact that we must remember about the real Mary—the Son of God lived in her womb for nine months. This is how Mary can be an instrument of unity. She united the Logos, the second person of the Trinity, with His human nature in her own body. Mary united more than any human being has ever united. She united God and man in the small confines of her own womb. Pon-

der this amazing reality. In Mary's womb, heaven and earth were joined, not as two separate realities, but perfectly united in the one person of the Son of God. No wonder it says that "Mary treasured all these things and pondered them in her heart" (Lk 2:19). It is a reality beyond words.

Mary was the instrument of unity for the body of Jesus Christ and this is why Mary has long been thought of as mother of the church. The church is the body of Christ and Mary was the mother of Christ's body, both physically and mystically. It is clear from Scripture that Jesus Christ is the key to unity among Christians, but the one Savior Jesus Christ would not be what he is—the perfect God-man—without Mary's being the means of uniting His divine and human natures in one person.

Mary's example of obedience and discipleship also forms the foundation of unity. Mary gave herself unreservedly to Jesus her Son. Every Christian wants to be an obedient disciple of our Lord and needs examples of obedience to do so. Mary was filled with grace, and this allowed her to listen to the commands of her God without delay. Mary was on earth what every Christian will become in heaven, filled with grace. Obedience means a readiness to say YES to God, a spirit of humility that says "Let it be" (fiat). Unity cannot be achieved through negotiation. It must come through obedience to the apostolic teaching given by Jesus to Paul and the other apostles. Without a willing spirit, we can never achieve God's desire for unity. Mary's life of obedience and discipleship calls us to unity with God through obedience.

The unity we seek is not human but divine. Its source is the divine life of Christ the Redeemer. It is that unity for which He prayed when He said, "Father, that they might be one." This kind of unity doesn't come from each group of Christians giving up some belief or practice for the sake of unity; it comes from each individual or group submitting to the authority of Christ and from the work of the Holy Spirit bringing oneness where it is humanly impossible. Like salvation itself, Christian unity is not within the grasp of human power. All we can do is open ourselves to the ministry of the Spirit to produce the unity that is impossible through negotiation.

It is because Mary has been such a stumbling block for Christians that a fuller

embracing of her person and role will achieve a greater unity than we might expect. If we view Mary apart from Jesus, then Mary cannot help us. Yet she was never meant to be seen apart from her Son. Just as the Magi found Jesus "with his mother" (Mt 2:11), so we find Mary involved with her divine Son, cooperating in His work and plan.

We cannot solve the problem of how to be one in Christ. Not by negotiation, not by one or the other side caving in. But God can solve our problems. God specializes in the impossible, just as He once said to Mary (Lk 1:37). If the Holy Spirit can form within the womb of the Virgin Mary a new entity—the unique God-man—then He surely can bring together Christians divided by history, suspicion and misinformation. Perhaps it's time for us to stop trying to be unified and let God do what we have failed to do. No one can see precisely how this will happen, but we know it won't happen without embracing the fullness of salvation in Christ himself.

Mary and the Unity of the Trinity

The unity we seek does not result from negotiated agreements. Our Christian unity must be founded on truth. It must be unity of heart and mind, a permanent oneness that is not shaken by the changing tides of custom and culture. The New Testament concept of unity is nothing less than union with the Holy Trinity. Jesus our Lord prayed that the oneness of His disciples would resemble and flow from the oneness experienced by the Father, Son and Holy Spirit: "That they all may be one, Father, as you are in me and I in you that they may also be one in us" (Jn 17:21). Jesus Christ does not want our unity to be like his and the Father's. He wants our unity to be the same as He and the Father have.

Mary is both a sign and an instrument of the unity coming from the Holy Trinity because she bears a unique relation to each member. Let's see how Mary is related to the Father, the Son and the Holy Spirit. First, however, a word of caution. In A.D. 431 the ancient Christian Church defined Mary as the Mother of God because the Church wanted to protect the full divinity and humanity of Jesus Christ. This title, Mother of God (or better God-bearer), asserted that the child in Mary's womb was nothing less than fully God and fully man. But the title Mother of God

never has been nor should be interpreted to mean that Mary is the mother of the Trinity. Mary bears a distinct relation to each member of the Trinity, but she is not the mother of the Father, nor of the Holy Spirit.

Mary is the daughter of the Father. When Mary proclaims herself the handmaiden of the Lord (Lk 1:38,48), she is declaring her filial obedience to the will of God. The love she has for the heavenly Father shows itself in her desire to be His vessel of bringing salvation to the world. What better sign of unity than this act of submission to the will of God? If we only follow Mary's lead, we will find ourselves united in heart as her heart was united with the heavenly Father's heart.

Mary did not negotiate with God, bargain with Him nor seek a compromise. She acknowledged her dependence on His grace and sought to perform His bidding. The will of the Father is unity for us who profess His Son. We will have unity only when we have submitted ourselves to the Father as Mary did.

Yet Mary is more than a sign. She is an instrument of unity. How is this true? Without her obedience the Savior would not have been born. Some Christians think that if Mary had refused Gabriel's invitation to bear the Savior, God would have found another woman. There is not the slightest evidence in the New Testament for this view. Mary freely gave herself to God's will of giving the world its Savior. By her instrumentality Mary united the Father to the world through His Son. In a profound sense, Mary united us to the Father through the Son. And that is how we will find a greater degree of unity today. By seeking to imitate her obedience and by seeking submission to the same Father through the Son she bore.

Mary is the Spouse of the Holy Spirit. Gabriel proclaimed that the Holy Spirit would come over her and the power of the Most High would overshadow her (Lk 1:35). This is the language of marital love (see Ruth 3:9; Zeph 3:17). Mary was united with the third person of the Trinity in order to give flesh to the second person. As the spouse of the Holy Spirit, she gave her body to the service of God so that she might receive the fullness of God. And so Mary is a sign of how we too must seek to be filled with the Holy Spirit to do the will

of God (cf Eph 5:18). It is the Holy Spirit who brings Jesus Christ today just as He brought the divine Christ to the womb of Mary (cf. Jn 14:17,18). When we are filled with the Spirit as Mary was, we are united to Jesus and we become more united with one another. Mary's union with the Holy Spirit brought us the Son who poured out the Spirit that we might be united with both Son and Spirit. Her union brings about our union.

Mary is the mother of the Son. Through her, Christ's divine and human natures were united into the one person that would save us from our sins. As Jesus' mother, Mary signals that our unity will only be in and through her Son. When Paul says that Jesus was "born of a woman ... that we might receive the adoption" (Gal 4:4,5), the apostle implies that true unity comes only from being members of the same family—the same family in which Jesus is the firstborn Son.

We cannot be members of many different families that have a tolerance for one another's beliefs and worship. No doubt tolerance for cultural and historical differences is essential, but that is still not the New Testament ideal of unity. Unity means being in the same family as Jesus ("one Lord"), having the same content of belief ("one faith"), living in the same Church body ("one baptism"). Only then can we be sure that we have the same "God and Father of all, who is over all, through all and in all." See Ephesians 4:4-6.

Mary: God's Woman of the Hour

Now is the time for unity among Christians. As we approach the beginning of the third millennium since Christ's birth, we see an almost unprecedented call to unity. Christian leaders the world over have caught a glimpse of Christ's will that "they may be one, Father, as you are in me and I in you" (Jn 17:21). The desire for unity is laudable and ought to be pursued with vigor. Yet the only unity worth pursuing, the only unity that will last is the unity that already exists in the Holy Trinity. This kind of unity is not something we achieve. It is something given to us as a gift. This unity is infused in our souls and expressed by oneness of mind and heart (doctrine and love).

Truth without love is barren and sterile. Unity without truth is empty and

fruitless. Jesus was a kind and compassionate man who proclaimed the truth. The Lord who wept over Jerusalem's obstinacy (see Mt 23:37-39), and who was moved with compassion over the "sheep without a shepherd," (Mk 6:34) is the same Lord who said that the truth of His words would not pass away (Lk 21:33). If Jesus is our Lord, then we must follow with equal vigor His truth and love.

Insistence on truth at the expense of unity will not do, nor will embracing unity at the expense of truth. Truth and unity are equally ultimate. Yet even now, we must realize the impossibility of reconciling truth and unity with human schemes and ingenuity. The only way to have unity is by having unity in Truth. The truth that brings unity is Jesus Himself who is "the way, the truth, and the life" (Jn 14:6). The truth Jesus gives is the complete teaching of His will as expressed in and through the Church of the apostles.

The Church is Jesus' idea and institution; it is part of the will of Jesus. And it is Christ's Church that wrote and gave us the Holy Scriptures and the truths of faith passed down from generation to generation. Obedience to Jesus means obedience to Jesus' Church. It is no accident that Christians have spoken of the Church as our mother for centuries. Classic Christianity spoke this way: the one who wants God as a Father must have the Church as a mother. Why is it necessary? Because Jesus is nurturing our faith through our mother, the Church. And that is why Mary is so important.

Jesus is our model but we must remember that even our Lord learned some of His commitment to truth and compassion from His mother. All we have to assume is that Mary lived her own words to see that this is true. She loved truth enough to consent to Gabriel's invitation to bear the Son of God (Lk 1:38). She was filled with compassion enough to see God's "mercy from generation to generation" (Lk 1:50). Mary was a woman of truth and love. Her commitment to God's truth and love lead her to the unity of the Son of God. Her submissive heart that willingly embraced God's truth and her devoted love for God brought about the unity of Christ's human and divine natures into the perfect unity of His one divine person.

So Mary's commitment to truth and unity is both our model and the means of

our unity. She modeled our path to unity by her embrace of the divine Son within her womb. We must embrace Him too. Mary is also the means of our having unity because without her act of submission to God we would not have the one Savior who can unify us.

It is time to lay down our defensive postures, to lay aside our personal and political agendas, to give up our dearest visions for the Church and to embrace the complete will of Christ. I believe that if we could simply be like Mary on that day when Gabriel came to her, we could then say with her, "Let it be done to us according to your word" (Lk 1:38). Perhaps, she could say with us:

Lord, we are your servants.
Heal our divisions and
Let Your Son reign as Lord within.
Let Your Word dwell within us
And make us one.

Holy Mary, Mother of God, pray for us sinners, now and at the hour of our death. Amen.

This article is from Ken's book, [Mary of Nazareth: Sign and Instrument of Christian Unity](#). [Queenship Publishing]



What About Marian Apparitions?

By Mark Miravalle, S.T.D.

Whether one is Catholic or non-Catholic, we can't miss the news of reported apparitions of Mary occurring all around the globe, often to young children from third world countries. How should we take these reports? Should we merely write them off as hysterical fanaticism or figments or overzealous imagination? Are they staged counterfeits by people seeking fame? Are they of the devil and his demons? Or is Mary truly appearing and speaking to Her children? The following article explains how the Catholic Church evaluates and authenticates reported private revelation.

What norms or criteria does the Catholic Church use in evaluating a reported private revelation? The general criteria used by the Church in evaluating a reported Marian apparition can be divided into these three categories: 1) the revealed message content; 2) the nature of ecstasy and other concurring phenomena; and 3) the spiritual fruits.¹

Any reported message revealed in a private revelation must be examined in light of the public revelation contained in Scripture and Tradition as safeguarded by the Church. If any reported message conveys a substantial doctrinal or moral error against Church teaching, the re-

ported revelations are deemed to be false. The Holy Spirit, the same divine source of inspiration for public revelation and authentic private revelation alike, cannot contradict Himself. Since private revelation is at the service of public revelation, then the "command to act" given by private revelation must correspond to the "revealed doctrine" of public revelation.

Secondly, the nature of ecstasy experienced by the "visionary" or recipient of prophecy or apparition is another principal factor in the process of Church investigation. Oftentimes, the visionary or recipient of a major private revelation is partially removed from an ordinary time

and space experience during the God-granted revelation, and is partially brought into the temporal-spatial experience of the giver of the revelation, whether it be Jesus or Mary. In other words, the visionary is brought into an ecstatic state that at least partially transcends his usual sense experience.

A medieval means of testing the authenticity of a reported visionary during ecstasy included the injecting of a large needle into the arm of the alleged visionary to test the legitimacy of his or her ecstatic state. The much improved modern means of medico-scientific testing during a reported ecstasy (which includes EKG,

EEG, and other technological data) has been a great help to the Church in distinguishing empirically a legitimate state of ecstasy from a false report.²

Other phenomena related to private revelation and worthy of examination include reported physical signs, such as solar miracles (as at Fatima), or miraculous springs (as at Lourdes), which cannot be explained by natural means, but only by a direct intervention of God.

Thirdly, the spiritual fruits constitute a major criterion for the authenticity of a private revelation, based on the scriptural message in which Our Lord refers to the good tree bearing good fruit: “for the tree is known by its fruit” (Mt 12:33). One of the best indications for the authenticity of a reported private revelation is when the resulting devotion manifests true and ongoing conversion, as seen in a return to the prayer and sacramental life of the Church (i.e., Mass, Confession, Rosary, fraternal charity, etc.).

Although it is possible for some spiritual fruits to result temporarily from a false private revelation because of its partial conveyance of the truths of Christianity; nonetheless, a revelation of either human or satanic origin cannot manifest substantial and consistent spiritual fruits comparable to the qualitative and quantitative spiritual benefits of a true revelation which has God as its ultimate source. The work of God and the work of man or Satan can never be seen as having identical fruits.

It is also noteworthy that even in the case of an authentic private revelation, it often happens that some error in the receiving or the transmitting of the revelation may occur because of the ever present human nature of the visionary. Several authentic private revelations that have received official Church approval have also had some secondary elements of human error, even when the visionary has been a canonized saint.³

If, after proper examination (usually performed by the local bishop), the Church is satisfied with the indications of authenticity and has excluded probabilities of error or fraud, she can grant its official approval. Normally, official Church approval means that there is nothing against faith and morals in the revelation and concurring phenomena, and that the faithful are free to accept the private revelation without concern for doctrinal or moral

error. This is sometimes called a “negative approval,” meaning the Church does not guarantee its authenticity, but officially pronounces the revelation free from doctrinal or moral error and thereby worthy of belief. This doctrinal clearance allows the faithful greater freedom regarding the acceptance of the revelation.

Degrees of Church Approval

Historically, the Church has exercised different degrees of official approval in regard to Marian private revelations. For example, to the Marian apparitions at Knock, Ireland (1879), the Church gave what may be called an “approval by omission.” By withholding official judgement and examining the devotion that came as a result of the reported apparitions, the Church has indirectly approved Knock as authentic by the acknowledgements of “Our Lady of Knock” and by visits to the apparition from Church authorities (for example, by Pope John Paul II).

Other reported Marian apparitions have received a degree of Church approval that goes beyond the usual negative approval, i.e., that it is not contrary to faith and morals. A few apparitions have actually received a positive judgement concerning their authenticity from the local bishop. This has happened, for example, in the Marian apparitions at Beauraing, Belgium in 1932-33, and in Bethania, Venezuela in 1987.

Any degree of official Church approval does not oblige the faithful to accept a Marian revelation, since it never directly affects the public revelation contained in the deposit of faith. Authentic private revelation, therefore, is normally given the assent of “human faith” based on prudential discernment, but not “divine faith” appropriate for public revelation.

As Pope Benedict XIV stated:

Even though many of these revelations have been approved, we cannot and ought not give them the assent of divine faith, but only that of human faith, according to the dictates of prudence whenever these dictates enable us to decide that they are probable and worthy of pious credence.⁴

On the other hand, the fact that the Church has given her approval after careful and oftentimes scrutinous examination

offers strong evidence for the prudence of human acceptance of a particular revelation. This is specifically the case regarding private revelations that the Church has “made her own” through papal statements, visits, and even liturgical celebrations, such as has happened with the revelations of the Sacred Heart of Jesus to St. Margaret Alacoque or the Marian apparitions of Lourdes and Fatima.

Moreover, it would be reprehensible if any Catholic, after the Church had granted her negative approval of a private revelation, were to contradict or ridicule a Church-approved private revelation or its corresponding devotion. Although the general faithful are called to give only an assent of human faith, it is also theologically held that the visionary and any others intimately connected with the revelation may and should accept the revelation with the assent of divine faith.⁵



1 For discussion of Church criteria, cf. R. Laurentin, “Role of Apparitions in the Life of the Church,” presentation at National Conference on Medjugorje, Notre Dame University, May 12, 1989.

2 For example, cf. R. Laurentin and H. Joyeux, *Scientific and Medical Studies in the Apparitions at Medjugorje*, (Dublin: Veritas Press, 1987).

3 Cf. Augustin Paulan, *Graces of Interior Prayer*, St. Louis, 1950.

4 Pope Benedict XIV, *De servorum Dei beatificatione et beatorum canonizatione*, v. 1-7 of *Opera Omnia*, 17 v. in 20; 2:32; 3:53.

5 Cf. Jordan Aumann, O.P. *Spiritual Theology*, (London: Sheed and Ward) p. 429.

St. Joseph: The World's Greatest Father

By Steve Wood

As ignored and avoided as Mary is by most non-Catholics, Joseph is even more so! Yet, God the Father also chose him specifically to be the foster father of His Son Jesus. In this article Steve Wood describes the unique and important role Joseph can play in helping men today become loving, faithful and holy husbands and fathers.

We are living in the beginning stages of the most extraordinary men's renewal movement in the history of Christianity. A sovereign wave of the Holy Spirit is moving in fathers' hearts preparing them to cross the threshold into the third millennium. We are seeing a fulfillment of Malachi's prophecy fulfilled before our eyes:

Behold, I will send you Elijah the prophet before the great and terrible day of the LORD comes. And he will turn the hearts of fathers to their children and the hearts of children to their fathers, lest I come and smite the land with a curse. (Malachi 4:4-5 RSV[CE])

What role will Joseph play in the restoration of fatherhood? To discover the greatness of Joseph's fatherhood, we need to explore three key relationships in his life: that with Mary, with Jesus, and with the Heavenly Father.

Joseph's Relationship with Mary

Joseph was not the biological father of Jesus, yet Holy Scripture and the Mother of our Lord call him Jesus' father (Luke 2:48). How can this be?

Both for Joseph and ourselves, the marriage covenant is the root of fatherhood. Joseph's fatherhood sprung entirely out of his marriage covenant with the Virgin Mary. Christian and Jewish theologians recognize that Joseph and Mary were legally married at their betrothal. Thus, Joseph and Mary were legally bonded in the marriage covenant at the time of the annunciation.

Joseph is much more than an "adoptive" father of Jesus. An adoptive father receives a child born outside of the mar-

riage covenant. Jesus' conception and birth were within the marriage covenant. Thus Joseph was the father of Jesus in every way, except biologically.

The essence of Joseph's fatherhood, like all Christian fatherhood, grew out of the marriage covenant. This is why the genuine restoration of fatherhood in our day must include a primary emphasis on keeping the marital covenant. When men ignore the problem of breaking that contract, it may make them feel better in the short run; yet it will abort any long-term success of the present renewal. We cannot build up men if we allow ourselves to short-circuit the covenant through divorce.



(Any doubters are urged to read [Fatherless America](#) by David Blankenhorn.) Thus, fatherhood finds its origin in the marital covenant.

Joseph's Relationship with Jesus

The profound oneness created by the covenant of marriage includes the complete and total sharing of goods. For "marriage is the most intimate of all unions which from its essence imparts a community of gifts between those that by it are joined together" (Quamquam Pluries/On Devotion to St. Joseph, Pope Leo XIII, 1889). Mary shared with Joseph both her unique graces and the supreme good given to their marriage, namely the Christ child.

Joseph is the father: his fatherhood is not one that derives from begetting offspring; but neither is it an "apparent" or merely "substitute fatherhood." Rather, it is one that fully shares in authentic human fatherhood and the mission of a father in a family (Guardian of the Redeemer, Section 20, John Paul II).

It was the ancient Jewish custom for fathers to name their children. The Jewish people did not choose names lightly—they considered their significance. St. Joseph received a divine command to name the child Jesus (Matthew 1:21). In conferring the name, Joseph declared his own legal fatherhood over Jesus, and in speaking the name he proclaimed the child's mission as Savior (Guardian of the Redeemer, Section 12).

As members of the New Covenant family of God, Jesus calls us "brothers" (Hebrews 2:2-13). This brotherhood with Christ is not just an abstract, spiritualized notion. In the New Covenant we share a "flesh and blood" union with Christ our Brother through the Blessed Eucharist. Think about this!

If Jesus is our “brother”, then Joseph is also our “father.” We have both an earthly and a heavenly father in the throne room of the universe. We all have a tendency to underestimate the richness of the inheritance Christ shares with us in the New Covenant. Do we realize that we have an exalted earthly father in heaven who cares for us as much as he cared for Jesus in Bethlehem, Egypt, and the carpenter shop in Nazareth?

That sacred household Joseph headed with the authority of a father contained within its limits the scarce-born Church. In the same way that Mary is the mother of all Christians (whom she bore on Mount Calvary amid the supreme throes of the Redemption), Jesus Christ is the first-born of Christians, and we, by the adoption and redemption, are his brothers and sisters; the Blessed Patriarch looks upon the multitude of Christians who make up the Church as confided specially to his trust—this limitless family spread over the earth. Because he is the spouse of Mary and the Father of Jesus Christ he holds, as it were, a paternal authority. It is natural and appropriate that, as Joseph ministered to the needs of the family at Nazareth and girt it about with his protection, he should now defend and cover with the cloak of his heavenly patronage the Church of Jesus Christ (Quamquam Pluries, Section 3).

To the thousands of men deprived of a healthy relationship with their fathers: Go to Joseph and ask for his prayers! To those seeking to overcome a negative father image: seek no further than Joseph for a potent cure. To the millions of children in fatherless families: Go to Joseph! You will find an earthly father who, like the heavenly father, is a father of the fatherless. The heavenly father has provided a link to himself through the fatherhood of Joseph over the whole family of God.

Joseph’s Relationship with the Heavenly Father

Joseph has been called the “Shadow of the Father.” Like every father, Joseph was called to be a living image of the heavenly father to his child. Any father contemplating this high calling of imaging the heavenly father might be tempted to despair because of personal inadequacies. God is willing and able to abundantly provide for what he commands. The calling to fatherhood is no exception.

Since it is inconceivable that such a sublime task would not be matched by the necessary qualities to adequately fulfill it, we must recognize that Joseph showed Jesus “by a special gift from heaven, all the natural love, all the affectionate solicitude that a father’s heart can know” (Guardian of the Redeemer, Section 8 quoting Pope Pius XII).

If, then, St. Joseph is not the father, how could he have the love of a father? It is here that we must understand the action of the power of God in this work. As an effect of this power, Joseph has the heart of a father; and if nature does not bestow it upon him, then God gives him one from His own hand. The same hand which forms each man’s heart makes the heart of a father in Joseph, and the heart of a son in Jesus. God—the true Father of Jesus Christ, who generates Him from all eternity and having chosen holy Joseph to act as the father of His Son in time has in a certain fashion infused a ray or spark of the infinite love which He bears His Son. This changes Joseph’s heart, and gives him the love of a father (Joseph and Jesus: A Theological Study of Their Relationship by Francis L Filas, quoting Bossuet an 18th century writer, p. 104).

God the Father’s plan is to do extraordinary things in the lives of ordinary men. Our problem is that our expectations of what God wants to do to us and through us as fathers are too small. “Joseph had the heart of a father bestowed on him by the Eternal Father in the sharing of their common name” (ibid. page 95). Centuries ago the prophet Malachi told us to expect something miraculous to happen in the hearts of fathers. Can you dare to believe that God’s desire is to place within you the heart of a father as he did to Joseph?

For this reason I bow my knees before the Father, from whom every family in heaven and on earth is named, that according to the riches of his glory he may grant you to be strengthened with might through his Spirit in the inner man, and that Christ may dwell in your hearts through faith; that you, being rooted and grounded in love, may have power to comprehend with all the saints what is the breadth and length and height and depth, and to know the love of

Christ which surpasses knowledge, that you may be filled with all the fullness of God. Now to him who by the power at work within us is able to do far more abundantly than all that we ask or think, to him be glory in the church and in Christ Jesus to all generations, for ever and ever. Amen.

Ephesians 3:14-21



Steve was a Presbyterian pastor before he and his family were received into the Catholic Church in 1990. Their complete conversion story can be read in Surprised by Truth.

Recommended Resources:

Available from the Family Life Center St. Joseph, Fatima and Fatherhood by Msgr. Joseph A. Cirrincione (booklet).

Life With Joseph by Rev. Paul J. Gorman (booklet).

Guardian of the Redeemer, Apostolic Exhortation of Pope John Paul II (booklet).

Fatherless America: Confronting Our Most Urgent Social Problem by David Blankenhorn (available in paperback).

Available on EWTN Online Services the Catholic computer network formerly called CRNET. See back cover for Internet address.

Quamquam Pluries, 1889, encyclical of Pope Leo XIII on St. Joseph. (At EWTN.com download L13JOS.txt, or L13JOS.zip). Highly recommended!

The Family for Families: Reflections on the Life of Jesus, Mary, and Joseph by Francis L. Filas. (At EWTN.com download P11DIVIN.txt, or P11DIVIN.zip.) For those using Word for Windows we recommend using your autoformat feature to nicely lay out this invaluable book available free from EWTN Online Services!

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A Convert's Response To Friends

From a letter by Robert E. Day

Though this issue is devoted to Mary, we thought it would be helpful to include this more general apologetics article written by a lay convert to his friends.

Dear Folks,

Because you are among several folks who are worried that we have fallen off the Christian cliff, I thought that this record of an interchange with Internet friends who had similar concerns might ease your anxiety about our salvation prospects. It is important to understand that we are not writing this to try to convert you, but to hopefully neutralize your prejudices so if any other friend converts, you can say "Gee Whiz, that is wonderful" as opposed to "You poor lost soul." Here is the interchange:

Friend: How can you join the Roman Catholic Church when the Pope has all that authority over you and what right has he to lead the Church anyhow?

Response: A marvelous question that many Evangelicals have and a critical question for the validity of the Catholic Church as the Church of Jesus Christ. To begin with, at Caesarea/Philippi at the rock above the source of the Jordan River and on which there was a statue of one of the Pagan Gods, Jesus Christ told Peter that, he, Peter was the rock, and on this rock, Jesus would build his Church as recorded in Mt:16, 18. Furthermore, Jesus gave him the Keys to the Kingdom, (vs.19), which is a reference back to Isaiah 22 referring to the office of Prime Minister. This essentially made Peter the first Vicar of Christ. In other words when the King gave the Keys to the Kingdom to the Prime Minister, it was meant to be for the office and to be handed on to the successors. Since then 262 Popes have succeeded Peter to this day. One more reference is

helpful: at the end of the Book of John 21:17, Jesus, after asking Peter three times if he loved him, then told him to "feed my sheep".

Friend: Interesting, but where in the Bible is there evidence that Peter assumed his position as Prime Minister?

Response: Good question since we need to verify these claims either in the Bible or in the Church traditions. In the Book of Acts of the Apostles, Peter showed us that he was the Chief Apostle in several places: (1) In Ch. 1, Peter was in charge of filling the Office vacated by Judas; (2) after Pentecost in Ch. 2, it was Peter who explained the meaning of Pentecost to the people; (3) in Ch. 3 Peter healed the crippled beggar, then gave a long speech explaining the need to repent and believe; (4) in Ch. 4 Peter made the presentation to the Sanhedrin standing firm against their threats; (5) in Ch. 15 Peter led the first Jerusalem Council to settle a controversy when certain Jewish Christians demanded that the Gentiles be circumcised; and (6) in Ch. 10 Peter was given the vision by God to go to Cornelius and baptize him and his family. Peter went to Rome and with the help of Paul built the Christian body. It would take too long here for all of the references, but the first, second, third, fourth and later century fathers, in their writings, refer to Peter as the first Pope: i.e. Iraneous, Polycarp, Ignatius, Martyr, Origin, Augustine and others. Their letters are available for reading. (A good summary of these important references can be found in "Jesus, Peter and the Keys" (Queenship) by Butler, Dahlgren and Hess)

Friend: You exhausted me with that answer, and let's suppose I reluctantly agree, but I plan to read the Church Fathers to verify your assertions because I have not been told about such proofs by my local pastor. But we still have problems: you people are not allowed to read the Bible.

Response: We hear that all the time and it persists from the old days when a) there were no Bibles to read, b) illiteracy prevailed, c) many printed Bibles contained both accidental and intentional misprints, and d) there was a fear that the same results would prevail as occurred in Protestantism. There are now estimated to be over 25,000 Christian denominations and groups in the world because of so many interpretations of the Bible. The Catholic Catechism, Article 3, clearly states that Catholics are encouraged to read and study the Bible. In fact, we had six different adult Bible Classes on the Acts of the Apostles at my Parish this fall and they will resume in the Spring.

Friend: I guess my sources have been incorrect or biased, certainly uninformed. But there is more. I understand that you Catholics have to try to work your way to heaven, and that is not Biblical according to my Bible. Also, you add tradition to your bag of tricks where we Evangelicals believe in salvation by Faith Alone and Bible Alone without the traditions of men.

Response: The cry of the Reformation was Sola Scriptura and Sola Fide. Yet the Bible states nowhere that we are saved by faith alone or that the only source of Christianity is the Bible alone. So

neither of these solas are in the Bible. In fact James 2:24 clearly states that we are NOT saved by faith alone but by faith and works. This is confirmed in many places including Galatians 5:6 “faith working by charity.” Second Timothy 3:16 is the verse most often quoted by Evangelicals to prove Bible Alone, but the letters to Timothy had not even been written until near the end of Paul’s tenure, so his reference was to the Old Testament. Paul did not say that the Old Testament scriptures were the only source, only that they were inspired and profitable. As to tradition, Catholics do not believe in traditions of men but in Sacred Tradition. An example is the Trinity which is not in the Bible per se. In the early centuries there was no final collection of letters called the New Testament so Christian Truth had to be passed on by Tradition. It was by word of mouth as Paul says in II Thessalonians 2:15, “follow the TRADITIONS I have taught you.” We learn a great deal about the Traditions of the Church from the early Fathers. You will discover this when you read their writings. And it is interesting to read the last Chapter, verse 25 of the Book of John, where he talks about the many things that are not written. If you believe what he says you might conclude that the Bible is not the only source of truth. There is one caution, though, about reading the writings of the early Church Fathers (some of whom were witnesses of the disciples, i.e. Polycarp was a friend of John). The great Anglican convert, Cardinal John Newman, warned that you cannot remain Protestant if you read and study the history of the Church.

Friend: Frankly I don’t like the idea of a central Church and Pope telling me what to do.

Response: In this day and age no one seems to like to yield to authority; they would rather do their own thing, or whatever feels good. But remember that the Church is the body of Christ. And as the Vicar of Christ, the Pope is speaking for him. The interpretations as reproduced in the Catechism and in Encyclicals that are presented to the faithful serve to provide a proper understanding of doctrine. The encyclicals usually are written and the councils called as a result of heretic challenges as a means of clarification of the Biblical, Traditional, and Church view.

For example, the Council of Jerusalem followed the circumcision question and the Council of Trent followed the Reformation heresies.

Friend: You seem to have an answer for everything and frankly I am startled to learn of your responses. There are many more problems, however. You have all of these so-called Sacraments whereas we don’t have to be bothered with them. Why don’t you tell me why they are necessary?

Response: All right, let’s explore them one at a time starting with Baptism—including Infant Baptism, which is always good for a debate. You will note in the Book of Acts that early Christians were Baptized after they repented and received Jesus. In Ch 16 Paul baptized the jailer and his entire family, as did Peter with the household of Cornelius who was the first Gentile Christian. We can assume that there were children in the family, thus infants were undoubtedly baptized. John 3:5 says that a man (pardon the male chauvinism) must be born again of the water and the spirit to enter the kingdom of heaven. The Catholic belief, based on Bible exegesis and Tradition is that water baptism removes original sin through the mystical combination of the water and the spirit.

Friend: I’ve got you on that one, as even Catholics believe that they are sinners. How could they be considered sinners if original sin was removed at Baptism?

Response: The Catholic Church teaches that God leaves us with concupiscence, which is the ability to sin as we go through life, otherwise we would all be robots. The challenge for mankind is to fight diligently to overcome the sinful desires and temptations in order to gain our place in God’s kingdom. He gives us a free will to accept or reject his grace, and it is only through God’s grace that we have the power to resist. If we lead a sinful life, God punishes us by letting us go, and in so doing we become addicted to whatever sin we choose and can lose our salvation. He will always allow us back into his flock, but only if we repent and sin no more, e.g. the Prodigal Son.

Friend: You are a difficult person to back into a corner, but let’s explore some more of your Sacraments. I understand marriage and am upset that many of the Evangelicals do not consider it a sacred vow, or covenant, with God. In that respect I am Catholic already. And Confirmation makes sense to me also. But there is this problem with the Eucharist. I am convinced that it is symbolic and I cannot go along with the idea of eating flesh and drinking blood. At our Church, we have communion once a month or so, which should suffice for a symbolic gesture. I am sure you agree with that, right?

Response: Wrong....the Eucharist seems to be difficult for you Evangelicals probably because you do not study your Bible in all the key places where it is explained. It started back when Abraham went to the High Priest Melchizedek who gave him bread and wine. And it is present in the Passover feast, and certainly it is very clear at the Last Supper as described in the Gospels. You will note as you read the early Church Fathers that not only was infant baptism followed, but the Eucharist was also celebrated with a belief in the real presence of Jesus Christ. To understand this you must read John 6, the entire chapter, very slowly and prayerfully. You will note in vs 50 that Jesus refers to the bread that comes down from heaven after the ascension. This is to calm their fears of cannibalism. So it is heavenly bread and blood that he is referring to. Six times in the chapter he tells them to eat his flesh and drink his blood and note that all but the twelve walk away. He did not say, “Hey fellows I did not mean it literally, come on back.” No, he let them go. Don’t you think if it were meant to be a symbolic gesture he would have stopped them? The Eucharist is the heart of the Mass and we believe that Jesus Christ is present with us in the consecrated bread and wine. Even Martin Luther believed in the presence of Christ in the Eucharist.

Friend: I guess I’ll have to read and study John 6 to verify your assertions. Evangelicalism is a lot simpler: all I have to do is say the Sinner’s prayer and I’m given a non-revocable ticket to heaven; have faith and I will automatically do good works, but whether

or not I do good works, it doesn't matter, as my salvation is imputed, as RC Sproul claims. Now for another point that you brought up. You brought it up, so don't blame me. I have been told that the Mass is a pagan ritual and certainly not Biblical.

Response: I would certainly like to know who you have been talking to, for they certainly were not talking about the Roman Catholic Church. I hate to burst your bubble but according to the Bible your sense of security is a false one. The Bible is very clear about justification and sanctification being a journey that can lead us to salvation but it is also clear that we must work hard through God's grace in obedience to His will throughout our life. Can you imagine the God of the Bible accepting a dedicated sinner, although claiming to be Born Again, who is unrepentant, into his kingdom? Even Paul talks about how he struggles to do good and fails and has to keep trying. Why would he bother if he already had his ticket? Regarding the Mass, it is what makes Catholicism so beautiful. Nearly every word in the Mass is from the Bible, except the Homily. Not only do we read from the Old and New Testaments but we sing the Psalms, the Lord's Prayer and we repeat the Nicene Creed. And as an aside, have you ever noticed near the end of the Creed "one (not 25,000) Holy, Catholic and Apostolic Church? As stated above, there is a continuous apostolic succession of 262 Popes up to our present John Paul II. And have you ever encountered such a Holy Man, and with the courage of a Lion? He even has the courage to fight off the militant feminists.

Friend: I must say that I am exhausted and bewildered as I have not been told any of what you have stated above; in fact, quite the opposite. But you will have to admit that you worship Mary. (Got you on that one I bet.) And why do you have all those statues?

Response: Again, you have a misconception of what Catholics believe. You must tell me who taught you all of these terrible untruths; I don't blame you for thinking I fell off the cliff. The Catholic Church believes that Mary was ever virgin and the Mother of Jesus. As a Mother, she

nurtured Jesus as a boy and was faithfully with him to the end. It is difficult for Catholics to understand why Protestant mothers would be troubled in honoring Mary, the greatest mother of them all who, as the second Eve, was obedient to the Lord, whereas Eve disobeyed God. As a loving Mother, she is asked to intercede for us when praying to Jesus. We know, as do you, that we must go to the Father through the Son per John 6 (vs. 30f). And Catholics certainly can pray to Jesus directly. But we do not hesitate to ask those who are close to Jesus to put in a good word. I would guess that this happens in every family when the children suspect that the father will say no, they go to the mother first. In fact, you, yourself will ask friends to pray for you or someone you know. How much greater is it to ask Mary, the Mother of Jesus, to intercede for us? We believe that the Catholic Church is a Covenant Family with God the Father, Jesus the Son, Mary our Mother and we His children. Regarding the statues, you will agree, I am certain, that they are beautiful reminders of our Lord and the Saints. I bet that you have family pictures in your house as a reminder of family and friends. (And what was that nativity scene I saw in front of your church last Christmas?)

Friend: You have given me food for thought/ After digesting this I'll be back to ask more questions, as it is evident that I may have been misled. But I am not going to give in without a struggle and an in-depth study—right?

Response: Right—you must find out for yourself and not rely on the words of mere men like me. I urge you to read, study, and pray for guidance from the Holy Spirit. You will find the Catholic faith to be a rich and deeply holy faith. And it has taken many hours of study of Catholic writings, early history, and the Bible, plus listening to the teachings on EWTN of people like Fr. Benedict Groeschel and other brilliant and well educated men, in addition to discussions with Catholic friends, to gather the meager understanding I've secured so far. May our Lord richly bless you in your struggles and study!

Robert, and his wife Sylvia are both converts to the Catholic Church.

Lewis, continued from page 5...

just brings everything into focus!" Before I would finish, Joetta would interrupt and say, "Larry, wait, wait. Listen to this!" She would then read from a different section of the Catechism. We would read supporting Scripture verses, go to the writings of the Early Church Fathers, and then check a commentary. Before we knew it, it was one o'clock in the afternoon!

We were like sponges. We began to see issues such as the real presence of Christ in the bread and wine, the role of Mary in the Church, prayers to the saints, Scripture and Tradition as authoritative vs. sola Scriptura, papal authority, purgatory, and salvation as a process vs. salvation as a completed work in a whole new light. It was like finding all the lost pieces in a huge theological puzzle. The full picture was becoming clear.

The Lord was taking us down two paths simultaneously—one intellectual and the other emotional. We had been praying the rosary and parking ourselves on Bob and Johanna's sofa, asking question after question about Catholic doctrine, tradition, and culture. We asked God to somehow reveal to us if He was drawing us to the Catholic Church, because none of this made any sense to us. We had spent all of our lives in Protestant churches and were quite content in our ministry. We desperately needed to know about the Church to which God was calling us, so three short weeks into our conversion, I prayed this prayer. "Father, if you are drawing us into the Catholic Church, I want a sign, and I want it big."

Several days later on our way home from a short trip to Dallas, we witnessed the largest, most vivid sun either of us had ever seen. It went from horizon to horizon, and we thought we were going to drive right into it—an indescribable array of colors: orange, red, and pink. It was magnificent, so much so that our young grandson, who was sleeping in the backseat, sat up and said, "Grandpa, Grandpa, do you see that? Isn't it beautiful?" As brilliant as it was, we could look right at it.

As the sun went down, we put in a cassette tape by Dr. Scott Hahn and continued toward Oklahoma City. As I looked into the night sky, I prayed again silently, "Oh, God, if you're drawing us

into the Catholic Church, give us a sign, and please make it big!"

At the same time, unknown to me, Joetta was staring out the passenger window, silently praying, "Blessed Mother, if you're real, we have to know beyond a doubt." Suddenly, I heard Joetta gasp and say, "Oh, my, Larry, Larry, look!" As I looked to the right, I saw what looked like a chain of stars falling in slow motion at a downward angle from right to left. Just before the stars reached the horizon, they shot straight up and then fell back toward the earth again, falling right in the center of the highway. Usually a falling star shoots downward and moves so quickly you don't have time to tell anyone about it. We were speechless, because we both saw it! Finally Joetta broke the silence, "You did see that, didn't you?" We were both visibly shaken.

I put in a cassette by Catholic singer Dana in which she sings through the rosary, and for the next hour and thirty minutes, we prayed the rosary with her. We finished just as we reached the exit road going toward our parsonage. As we turned under the freeway and went up over a little hill, there, sitting on the road in front of us, was the most beautiful, enormous, vivid quarter-moon we had ever seen. Like the sunset, it seemed to literally sit in the middle of the road and extended as high into the sky as we had seen the sun. For two-and-a-half miles, we watched in total silence.

As we turned into our driveway, the moon disappeared. "Joetta, what does all of this remind you of?" "Revelation, chapter twelve," she said: " 'A great and wondrous sign appeared in heaven: a woman clothed with the sun, with the moon under her feet and a crown of twelve stars on her head.' " At that moment, we knew not only that the Holy Spirit was bringing us to the Catholic Church but that Mary was leading the way.

Two months later, Joetta and I knelt in a small chapel on the University of Tulsa campus and prayed the prayer of Consecration to the Immaculate Heart of Mary. Our love for her is without bounds. I had been afraid that she would somehow take away from my love for Jesus, but what I found was that my love for Christ has deepened beyond measure. Truly, our cup runs over!

On September 12, 1997, I surrendered my ordination papers to Bishop

Bruce Blake of the United Methodist Church. In doing so, I laid down thirty years of Protestant ministry to become a Catholic. To many of my colleagues, this seemed a horrible mistake, but to Joetta and me, it was "coming home."

In January 1998, we made a pilgrimage to Rome to symbolize our desire to place ourselves under the authority of Pope John Paul II and the Roman Catholic Church. In March, we made a pilgrimage to a Marian site in Eastern Europe to thank the Blessed Mother for bringing us into the Church. And finally on Easter Vigil, with great anticipation, Joetta and I were received into full communion with the Catholic Church. This was the culmination of a twenty-three month, life-transforming odyssey. Thank you, Mary, for loving us home.



Larry Lewis received a master of divinity degree from Phillips Theological Seminary and was a doctoral candidate at Oral Roberts University, where his doctoral research was on Catholic apologetics. Larry passed away on January 23, 2003. Joetta currently lives in Texas near their daughter and three grandchildren.

Before you object...

By *Marcus C. Grodi*

As we compiled the articles for this journal, we tried to consider continuously how these topics and their presentations would be heard and received by non-Catholics.



We wanted to be sensitive, because having been non-Catholics most of our lives, we remembered how uncomfortable we were with many Catholic teachings and traditions, especially any relating to Mary. For many of us, Mary was the last and biggest hurdle to get over, and for this reason we decided to focus this first Coming Home Journal on her.

In rereading these articles, I've tried to remember what kinds of objections I would have had as a Protestant pastor. As I jotted these down, they all seemed to coalesce into basically one complaint—which actually is the most common objection I receive from non-Catholics about most any Catholic teaching: “Where does it teach this in Scripture?”. In other words, “Show me in Scripture where I have to believe that Mary was conceived immaculately, or that she was assumed into Heaven, or that I can pray to her, asking for her intercession as Mother of all Graces?!”

First, allow me to say that I am very sympathetic to this objection, having been not only a Protestant for forty years, a pastor for over nine, and an avid though admittedly inadequate student of Scripture. Whenever I consider a teaching of the Catholic Church that is based predominantly on Sacred Tradition, that little red flag still raises up within my own conscience. I still tend to feel a bit more comfortable when I can clearly point to a chapter and verse.

Given this, however, let me humbly request that you consider at least three things. First, as you can identify through a careful rereading of the articles in this journal, most of the teachings about Mary do have strong foundations in Scripture. If they're not directly addressed, they can at least be logically deduced through Scriptural reasoning. In fact, as Kenneth Howell pointed out in his article on Mary

and Christian Unity, there are many more Scriptural references to Mary than other doctrines that are unquestionably held by most Christians.

Second of all, it is important to recognize that the idea or “doctrine” that states that “for a Christian truth to be true it must be shown in Scripture” is in fact a modern tradition of men. Throughout Christian history, the Scriptures were always a foundation in defense of Christian truth, as can be found in the writings of the Early Church Fathers or the great Doctors of the Church. But never do you find them demanding that a particular doctrine be proved solely from Scripture. This expectation arose during the Reformation, when both the authority of Church magisterium and Sacred Tradition were set aside as foundations for Christian truth. What is maybe most telling is that Scripture itself never makes this demand. Nowhere can you find in Scripture the phrase, “prove it to me in Scripture.” Let's take another doctrine, such as the Trinity. With Scripture alone, and no other traditional or doctrinal presumptions, one cannot decisively end up with the orthodox understanding of the Trinity as defined in the Council of Nicea. One, in fact, can come up with any number of explanations of how God the Father, the Lord Jesus Christ and the Holy Spirit coexist and relate. However, beginning from the Council's decisive definition of the Trinity, one can return to Scripture and see how this dogma is clearly illustrated in the truths of Scripture. The same is true with the dogmas of Mary. The traditional teachings of the Church make sense out of the data we find about Mary.

Thirdly, please consider that much of what you may have been taught about the Catholic Church may not be true. Sadly, too few Protestants have ever read anything about the Catholic Church writ-

ten by a Catholic. I would imagine that if you being a Methodist or Presbyterian, heard that I was teaching a class in my Catholic parish about what Methodists or Presbyterians believe, using a book written by Catholics, you might object, demanding that I use a book written by a faithful Methodist or Presbyterian. Shouldn't we expect the same for you? Please be careful—there are many books saying strange things about the Catholic Church, building amazing tales on half-truths. If you truly want to understand what the Catholic Church teaches about Mary and other doctrines and practices, then consider reading books by authors who love Jesus Christ and who desire to present the Catholic Church faithfully and truly (such as those listed in the resources in this journal).

I pray that this journal has been an encouragement to your faith. If it has raised any questions or concerns, please contact us, or the person who gave you this journal. Our desire is not to proselytize but to help you grow closer to Christ and to His Church, and in the process, become more like Christ in holiness.



