

Unveiling Mary



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Sister Patty Fawkner SGS



The month of May is dedicated to Mary of Nazareth. Patty Fawkner reflects on her own Marian journey from ‘naïve piety’ and disillusioned critic to contemporary model and spiritual companion.

By Sister Patty Fawkner SGS

Mary figured strongly in my childhood devotion and imagination.

There were the Scriptural stories of the Annunciation and Visitation and the inevitable Nativity pageant at the end of year school concert. We loved the stories of Mary’s apparitions to children at Lourdes and Fatima, and many of us wore a miraculous medal, scapular and, for girls, the Child of Mary blue cloak. We prayed the Angelus, *Memorare*, litany and family rosary.

Each May, I would create a small altar with flowers and candles and adorn it with as many images of Mary I could find. I was particularly fond of the centrepiece – a small statue which glowed in the dark. It was for good reason that my siblings named me “Pious Patty”! Truth be told, in regard to Mary, we were all pious.

The change in such piety was inevitable. As a young nun I could no longer accept at face value the Marian tradition in which I was reared. I reacted to what I perceived as a non-biblical, saccharine Marian fervour. Clad in a child-of-Mary-look-alike cloak, and with her English rose complexion, the popular images of Mary made her seem, in every way, not like us. She appeared more at home on a marble pedestal, than in Nazareth – a very non-romantic village, home to peasants and local craftsmen who were the “tradies” of their day.

I was critical of the tendency to divinise Mary even though I appreciated that this was some compensation for an overly patriarchal theology of God. The devotion of successive popes who honoured Mary as virgin and mother, and the ideal feminine to which all women were urged to aspire, I found irksome. Women’s feminine “genius” and complementarity seemed to be an endorsement of Mary’s meekness and mildness, passivity and subservience.

I was disdainful of most forms of Marian devotion, and disdainful of those people for whom such devotion was precious. The certainty of my stance was patronising and harsh. From being an uncritical lover, I had become an unloving critic.

Having all but given up on Mary, I felt something stir within and prayed, “God, show me what my relationship with Mary should be”. Surely there was some other path between sentimental attachment and outright rejection.

I have a healthy scepticism of visions – my own or other people’s. Yet while on retreat a number of years later, an image (was it a vision?) came to me. I saw the back of two women with arms linked standing side by side beneath the cross of Calvary. Without seeing their faces I knew one to be Mary and the other to be me.

My prayer had been answered; my relationship with Mary was that of companion. She stood alongside me as together we gazed, not at each other, but at her son Jesus.

It occurred to me that this is the journey we all need to take in matters of faith and belief – from naïve idealisation, through a necessary stage of critical suspicion and disillusionment, to, what the esteemed French philosopher Paul Ricoeur calls, a “second naïveté”.

My initial naïve piety could not sustain an adult faith. My scriptural studies with their tools of historical and literary criticism were a necessary, though at times confronting, challenge to a literal interpretation of Scripture. If God didn’t make the world in seven days, if Mary didn’t really see an angel, if Jesus didn’t really walk on water, what within the Bible was true? What do these stories mean? What do they mean for my faith?

Ricoeur says that we do not need to repudiate the stories of faith, but we do need to integrate them with an “informed engagement” with both the text and the complexity of our adult experience. Beyond *childish* literalism I can engage with my faith with a critical intelligence borne of sound scriptural and theological scholarship as well as a *childlike* wonder and imagination in the presence of mystery.

Instead of viewing biblical texts and creedal statements with only a deconstructive “hermeneutic” or perspective of suspicion, I can become a critical lover. By asking my suspicious questions, yes, but also engaging a hermeneutic of trust and creative imagination.

I wish to honour Mary with biblically-based interpretations which are more suited to contemporary life. When we engage with the scriptural texts with a second naïveté, with Mary as companion and one of us, rather than one beyond us, we recognise, as theologian Elizabeth Johnson says, a strong, resilient and self-possessed woman. In her acclaimed book, *Truly our Sister*, Johnson points out that in the Annunciation narrative, Mary says her “yes”, amazingly *without* recourse to the traditional male authorities of her day: “Exercising independent thought and action, she asks questions and takes counsel with her own soul. In a self-determining act of personal autonomy, she decides to go for it.” And the rest, we can say, is salvation history!

Liberation theologians and seekers of justice love Mary for her Magnificat in which she celebrates a God who has “brought down the powerful from their thrones, and lifted up the lowly.” The Virgin Mary of any first naïve piety could not have written this hymn of praise, [says spiritual writer Ronald Rolheiser](#).

Rather than the litanies I recited as a child where I honoured Mary with inscrutable names such as “Tower of ivory”, “Mother inviolate” and “Singular vessel of devotion,” I would like to take the lead from [blogger Christine Schenk](#), who praises Mary as “marginalised woman”, “unwed mother”, “refugee woman with child”, “mother of a political prisoner”, and “seeker of sanctuary”.

There will be no luminous statue of Mary on any altar I may create this May. But in my prayer space I have a beautiful image of the Annunciation. This May I pray that Mary, my companion

and sister in faith, may continue to help me look with compassion in the direction of her son and all those who suffer with him.

Spread the word

Patty Fawkner



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