

Mary, full of grace



The Lord is with you

May is the month devoted to Mary. The Marian tradition is a central and, for many people, a much loved part of Catholic tradition and developed over the centuries. Much of this understanding of Mary, or Mariology as it is called, came to life in the prayers and devotion, in the hearts and deeply felt pious sense of believers, and some of these beliefs later became enshrined in teachings.

Theologically, in the Catholic perspective, Mary has a precise place in Salvation as the 'mediatrix of grace', the one through whom God's salvation of humanity through Jesus has been fulfilled.

There are four dogmas relating to Mary: the perpetual virginity of Mary; Mary the Mother of God; the Immaculate Conception; the Assumption. The Immaculate Conception is the teaching that Mary herself was conceived free of original sin, and although the belief was widely held since at least late Antiquity, the doctrine was only formally proclaimed in 1854 by Pope Pius IX. The dogma of the Assumption states that "the Immaculate Virgin, preserved free from all stain of original sin, when the course of her earthly life was finished, was taken up body and soul into heavenly glory, and exalted by the Lord as queen over all things" (Catholic Catechism). This was only formally declared in 1950.

During the month of May various devotions to Mary take place. A traditional devotion is the crowning of Mary as Queen of the May, and although this is not as popular as it once was, it is still a much loved practice in some communities. Another custom is that of rather elaborate processions, carrying a statue of Mary through the streets, and this too has remained popular in some traditionally Catholic countries.



The most well-known prayer associated with Mary is the Hail Mary. The first part of this prayer are the words in Luke's Annunciation story: the angel's greeting, "Hail Mary, full of grace, the Lord is with you", and her cousin Elizabeth's greeting to her, "Blessed are you among women, and blessed is the fruit of your womb". The second part of the prayer, "Holy Mary, Mother of God", reflects Elizabeth's naming of Mary as "the mother of my Lord", and then there is a petition for Mary's intercession.

Many titles have been given to Mary, for example, Queen of all Saints, Queen Assumed into Heaven, Queen of Peace, Morning Star, Mystical Rose, Cause of our Joy and numerous others, and they form the litany of Mary. Mary has also been presented as both mother and virgin and over time the focus on the purity of Mary led to her becoming a more and more elevated figure. During the Medieval period popular Marian piety led to such extreme views where Mary did not give birth to Jesus in the usual way, but that the birth took place through her navel!

We can see that over time Mary was removed more and more from her humanity and in some way took on the characteristics of a mythical goddess figure. Part of the reason for this too was the prevalence of exclusively male images for God in the Christian tradition. This lack of feminine images and language for God diminished the fullness of the understanding of the Divine. The feminine images or attributes of God were therefore located firmly in Mary. People often claimed that they could relate more easily to Mary rather than a more seemingly distant male imaged God.

This tendency to almost divinize Mary and attribute almost all things to her is referred to as Marian maximalism, and theologians and Church leaders over the ages have often cautioned against these exuberant exaggerations. They have equally cautioned against the opposite, a minimalism in Marian understanding. However, the Church has always seen Mary as a model for all Catholics. But in fact, this in itself has been the reason for much inner conflict: Mary as model, both virgin and mother, depicted with an unattainable and unrealistic purity that transcends any semblance of humanity.



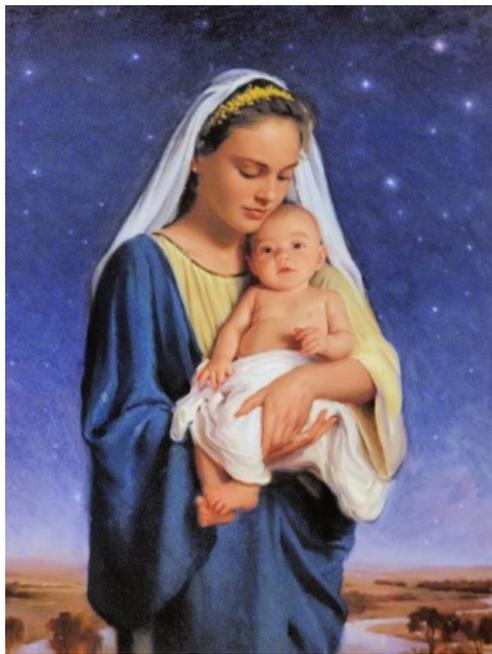
There is also a wonderfully rich Marian tradition in art and music. Paintings and sculpture portraying the significant understandings of Mary abound and are not only magnificent works of art but are also inspiration for devotion and prayer. Mary holding the body of her crucified son, known as the *Pieta*, is one of the most popular and moving subjects of sculpture. In the tradition of Marian music, there are numerous exquisitely beautiful settings of the *Ave Maria*, the *Magnificat* and the *Stabat Mater*, the Sorrowful Mother.



This is just a very brief overview of the understanding of Mary as it developed within the Catholic tradition, but what I would like to do is put all this aside and reflect on Mary, the young Jewish woman of 2000 years ago. What we know of her is that she was a deeply faith-filled young Jewish woman, living in faithfulness to the beautiful Covenant relationship of the Jewish people with God.

The Covenant is God's love and bond with the Jewish people, and it asks them to be faithful, to trust in God and to shape their lives around the Torah, the Teaching or the Divine Moral Law. For Jews, it is a delight and joy to observe the Law for this has been given to them by a loving and faithful God and seals their relationship with God. Mary was a young woman, walking day by day in the love of God, in faithfulness and in utter openness to God's presence in her life.

We don't know much else about Mary, but that says it all really. The image below is a painting by Australian artist Paul Newton. It's called *Our Lady of the Southern Cross* and it was commissioned by Cardinal George Pell for the 2008 World Youth Day and now hangs in St Mary's Cathedral in the city. It's a gorgeous, fresh and down to earth portrayal of Mary and although she is presented here as a Western woman, we do get a sense of the Mary of the Gospels - the Mary of 2000 years ago, absorbed as any mother is, in the pure joy of her child.



In recent decades, feminist and other theologians have done much to demystify and demythologize Mary, to cut through the many layers of tradition and discover the Mary of the Gospels. There is some wonderful literature on this Mary and one beautiful source is the work of Ann Johnson, *Miryam of Nazareth*. The woman portrayed in Ann Johnson's story is the person who was the one witness of the entire drama of Jesus' life. She was a woman deeply rooted in her religious Jewish history. Johnson presents Mary as a type, a typical Jewish woman of deep faithfulness to God and, in this book, she looks back through Jewish history and sees many instances of strong, faithful, hope-filled women who greatly impacted the community of their time and its development.

The root of the name Mary is the Hebrew *Miryam* or the Aramaic *Maryam*, which means 'rebellion' or 'hope of change'. Mary, as a typical Jewish woman, belonged to a people called into relationship with God, the Hebrew people, a people often in conflict with political authorities, whose infant sons were at times slain by alien rulers and who were at various times oppressed by foreign powers. Mary would have been deeply aware of the oppression of her people, of the plight of the poor and marginalized, and the saving action of God reaching out to

them, raising them up, promising them salvation through the Messiah. Her powerful outpouring in Luke's Gospel in the prayer known as the *Magnificat*, testifies to this:

“He has brought down the powerful from their thrones,
and lifted up the lowly:
he has filled the hungry with good things,
and sent the rich away empty.
He has helped his servant Israel,
in remembrance of his mercy,
according to the promise he made to our ancestors,
to Abraham and his descendants forever”.
(Luke 1:47-55)

Magnificat is a form of biblical prayer of praise and petition which would have been well known to Mary. Hannah, a woman of the Old Testament, prayed in this way when she gave birth to a son after years of pleading to God to grant her this desire. She, like Mary, praised God and then went on to recount the great saving action of God for the poor and oppressed.

So we get to know Mary, a woman in the long tradition of Hebrew biblical women grounded in deep prayer, liturgical observance, celebration and communal sensitivity. These women spoke out and changed the Hebrew community of their time. They made war on faithlessness, hopelessness and narrow-mindedness. They questioned, searched, changed and led their families into new understandings of relationship with God and with one another. And this is the Mary we meet in the brief mentions of her in the Gospels and which Ann Johnson expresses so poetically and in such a moving way.

This excerpt from Ann Johnson's work is an extended version of the text from Luke's Gospel (1:26-38): the greeting of the angel, announcing the conception of the child, and Mary's response. From a few lines in Luke's narrative, and situating Mary firmly as a Jewish woman living a life in consort with a creative God, Johnson presents Mary as a woman made in the Eternal image and reflecting that image. We encounter the Mary who lived and expressed her God-relationship in its fullest potential, walking day by day in openness to God, attentive, listening, responding. A woman truly full of grace. And from this openness, this quiet attentiveness to God, Mary gave birth to Jesus. She gave birth to God. In the Eastern Orthodox Church Mary is called *theotokos*, the God-bearer. The Gospel of Luke and Johnson's expression present us with a real woman, a holy woman, who shows us what it is to be a God-bearer. In this Mary we indeed have a role model for us today for, as Meister Eckhart, a Medieval mystic, said, “We are all called to be mothers of God, for God is always needing to be born”.

In those days when the people of Judea were oppressed
In the reign of King Herod

In the town of Nazareth there was a woman named Miryam.

In prayer Miryam watched.
Eyes of her soul turned inward, she watched.
Ears of her spirit stretched out, she watched.
Watched for Yahweh in stillness.

In awe Miryam listened.
With the firm beat of her heart, she listened.
With the deep stroke of her breath, she listened.
Listened for Yahweh in stillness.

In the stillness Miryam reached out.
Mind alive, she reached out.
Memory reflecting, she reached out.
Inviting her God to inspire.

The Shadow streamed into her being.
Greeting the core of her soul.
Hearing, she stretched for the life source.
Embracing the quickening call.

“How is this? I know not!” she responded.
Stumbling in God’s desert of time.
“But you speak and all things come together.
I will
 as you say
 let it be”.

Her lifetime of shadowy knowing was
 confirmed in the quieting joy.
Summoning cadences, ancient and deep,
 echoed the call of God’s peace.

Miryam arose and went out.
Holding the knowledge of change, went out.
Accepting the newness of challenge, went out.
Went out to begin the task.

Miryam embarked on the journey.
Her mind precise for the journey.
Her soul enflamed for the journey.
Journeyed to the arms of Elizabeth.

In the warmth of those arms, she knew.
Ancient pathways opening before her, she knew
Words of her people streamed from her mouth, she knew.

Knew that her God lived within her.

What a beautiful story and portrayal of Mary! And it is a story which can become our own too, for we are all called to attentiveness, to deep listening for God, to walk humbly with God and to allow God to bear fruit in our own lives, our hearts, our minds, so that we too may bless the world with holiness. As such she is a model of true holiness and an inspiration to all of us whose delight is to walk day by day with God.

Below is another little excerpt from Ann Johnson's writing which you may like to ponder and pray. In these weeks of May, you may like to take some time to sit quietly, light a candle, empty yourself of all else, and let these words find a home in you.



My soul rejoices in you,
and my spirit dances within your presence, my God,
because you who love mightily look upon me,
One who stands with arms stretched out toward you.
Blessed are we when we open our hearts and receive in joy the seed of the Everlasting One.
Holy is your name.
You are the gentle one who reaches out in tenderness from age to age
to caress with your hand the heads of those who bend their necks.
With powerful arms you embrace each of us.
The proud hearts that we hold out to you,
you break and scatter.
You pull down the structures and fantasies with which we fortify ourselves,
and you teach us the simple things.
Holy is this time,
and patience is your gift
to all who nurture the seed of your love.

*Ms Kerry McCullough
Spirituality and Liturgy Coordinator*